

Preservation performance assessment in Greek libraries and archives; a practical tool to enable excellence

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Abstract. The quality of preservation in cultural institutions has not been adequately or systematically benchmarked across organisations. So far, different tools for different purposes have been developed by major institutions or states, to assist libraries and archives in assessing their preservation status and thus, to enable them, through prioritization to implement planned, preservation actions. The authors developed a diagnostic, easy to use yet comprehensive, self-assessment preservation performance tool to assist mainly medium size institutions, in measuring their preservation management quality level and thus plan a thoughtful preservation roadmap. The tool follows the results of a comprehensive, nationwide research that seeks to expand available knowledge on the Greek institutions' preservation actions, policies and approaches to the preservation process. The tool will be available on the web and will be accompanied by an on-line guide. It will allow cultural institutions to make informed decisions about preservation actions, after their preservation maturity level has been defined and explained.

Keywords: self assessment tool, preservation, libraries, archives, maturity model

1. Preserving materials in a changing context

Museums, historical societies, libraries and archives are responsible not only for collecting, interpreting and exhibiting significant material that documents history, but also for the long-term preservation, security and accessibility of this material (Odgen, 1997). Providing effective care for the collections is an element of almost every aspect of managing the institution (The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, 2002) and within this context, preservation should not be seen as a choice of luxury (nice-to-have) but as a necessity (must-have). This is a difficult task, especially as resources are becoming scarce and

institutions need to preserve their collections while at the same time meet the ever growing, needs of their users. It is generally agreed that we have more deteriorated and endangered material in our collections that we can preserve (Reed-Scott, 2000). It is therefore important to turn the existing means to account and produce the best possible results.

2. **Assessing preservation: a review of tools**

Over the years, the increasing interest in preservation has led to the development of surveys and assessments for both preservation and management reasons. A number of specialized tools has been developed to help librarians, archivists, and curators to assess their preservation needs and decide on priorities for addressing them (Child). Assessment is closely connected to preservation since it “is the first step in the development of a preservation management program and occupies a key place in the development of subsequent policies, procedures and programs” (Craig, 1995). Self - assessment tools are important for in-house measurements and can provide a solid background for policies and actions. A pioneer in the field is the USA’s National Endowment for Humanities, which, in 1979, awarded a grant for the design and testing of a “self study procedure to enable academic libraries to identify and address preservation problems”; this led in 1980 to a survey on preservation activities in ARL member libraries and later on P. Darling and D.E. Webster (1987) presenting the *Preservation Planning Program. An Assisted Self-study Manual for Libraries* which could be internally used by all member libraries. Major institutions and organizations followed in producing tools for assessing preservation needs, conservation and collection care. The Museums and Galleries Commission (1998 and 2001) introduced *Levels of Collection Care: A self assessment checklist* and *Preservation Assessment for Libraries and Archives: User’s Guide*. Finally Beth Patkus (2003) developed a self-survey guide for assessing preservation needs for the Northeast Document Conservation Center. This tool is meant to help small to medium-sized institutions, with limited preservation experience (libraries, historical societies, archives and museums), design a program to ensure that their historical collections survive as long as possible in usable condition. In particular, the guide provides a template for assessing preservation needs, as well as guidance for setting preservation priorities once the needs have been identified.

Some institutions have also developed software in order to electronically facilitate the assessment of their preservation needs. Popular tools are the **NAGARA GRASP**, **Pre-NAP**, **CALIPR**, **CAT**, **RESOURCE’s Benchmarks** and British Library’s **PAS**. More specifically:

- **GRASP** (a Guide and Resources for Archival Strategic Preservation Planning) was developed and published by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA) to help archivists draw comprehensive preservation plans in their own repositories and within cooperative communities (Curtin, 1990b). It is

the only tool that provides a comprehensive approach towards preservation planning. It consists of three interrelated tools, a computer assisted self-study, a manual and a resource compendium (Curtin, 1990a).

- Preservation Needs Assessment Package (**Pre-NAP**) was presented by the Research Libraries Group (1993). The Needs Assessment concept was first raised at an RLG Preservation Committee meeting in May 1989. A task force worked for two years to develop an easy-to-use survey instrument for collecting comparable data that would identify the preservation program, planning and treatment needs of individual libraries. The tool is designed to assist library staff in surveying their entire collection so that preservation priorities may be identified. After institutions have implemented the assessment, data would be sent to RLG for compilation and central analysis.
- **CALIPR**, a popular and widely recommended product, was introduced in 1991 by the California State Library as an automated tool that assists all types of California repositories to assess preservation needs of books and document collections and is available through the internet. CALIPR compiles data and generates a management report to provide important insights into the needs of the collection as a whole and to those parts of the collection of greatest value and at greatest risk of damage and loss (CALIPR, 2007). However, according to the Research Libraries Group (RLG) staff, CALIPR has replaced Pre-NAP and Harvard Surveyor is a strictly internal product unavailable for general distribution and use (Higginbotham & Wild, 2001, 40).
- **CAT** (Condition Assessment Tool) is a computer software program developed by the Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) to help heritage organisations take better care for their collections (MGS, 2005). It is designed to enable heritage organisations to record information about the condition of objects in their collections and prioritise conservation work or improve collection care.
- **RESOURCE**, The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries in 2002 developed one of the most popular self assessment tools, **Benchmarks in Collection Care for Museums, Archives and Libraries**, originally in text format but since 2006 a database version using Microsoft Access™ is also available. Benchmarks aim to raise awareness of the range of collection care issues and to indicate defined steps to achieve best practice. Its checklist is separated in three deferent columns, representing different preservation status (*Basic, Good, Best*). Working through the columns will enable current and future levels of achievement to be defined (Resource, 2002).
- The British Library's Preservation Advisory Centre (2008) has developed **The Preservation Assessment Survey (PAS)**, a tool which provides an overview of preservation needs and priorities. It looks at the preservation measures in place (for example, handling procedures, storage conditions, physical protection, environment, security and

emergency planning) alongside demand, usability and significance and assesses damage to items. A 400-item sample is selected and surveyed (normally by staff working at the organisation), and the survey answers are entered into a Microsoft Access database provided by the Preservation Advisory Centre. The completed database is returned to the Preservation Advisory Centre where the survey findings are used to generate a statistically reliable report providing an overview of the organisation's preservation needs and priorities (Preservation Advisory Centre, 2008)

It is evident that the tools' development purpose ranges from assessing the collections' preservation needs, to guiding institutions in planning and organising their course of actions.

3. Benchmarks and Standards for assessment in preservation

Currently there are no international standards set by the International Standards Organization (ISO) for archive conservation (Pickford et al, 1997) and not all countries have set standards for collections care that include preservation. However, there are countries like the UK that have set both standards for archival preservation (BS 4971, BS 5454) and benchmarks in collections care for the UK libraries (Bell and Lidsay, 2000). The Council for Museums Archives and Libraries, Resource (2002) in its self-assessment tool stated that the benchmarks are a management tool and should be used in conjunction with the standards and technical specifications, while it included the relevant British Standards, dated from 1983 to 2002. Also,

allow the formulation of an assessment tool. These assessment tools include more or less the same topics but may vary in the extent of analysis needed. In Greece, there are neither national standards for conservation and preservation actions in libraries and archives, nor a standard typology for preservation assessment. Furthermore, there is not any available assessment tool for libraries and archives that could assist them in defining and recording their preservation needs.

4. Formal preservation policies and informal processes and actions: room for flexibility

In general, a policy is a plan of action to guide decisions. A typical policy cycle includes the following phases: 1. Problem identification, 2. Policy formulation, 3. Adoption, 4. Implementation and 5. Evaluation.

A preservation policy is, thus a plan of action for the safe keeping of library and archive material, that states what needs to be preserved, why, for what purpose, and for how long (Foot, 2006). The goals and priorities of a preservation policy should be firmly rooted in the institutional mission statement, based on a coherent, well-defined collection policy. Although the benefits from a preservation policy can not be argued, it is common for institutions to apply preservation actions without ever formulating a "formal" policy. Nevertheless, these actions or processes lead to sound results for collections maintenance and should not be underestimated. They may be an unintended part of an informal policy that could be the first step towards a "formal" preservation policy.

An attempt to formulate a preservation policy model to be used for guidance was made by UNESCO in 1990 with *Guidelines on Preservation and Conservation Policies in Libraries and Archives* (Chapman, 1990). According to UNESCO, a preservation policy should contain the following ten topics: Preventive measures, housekeeping routines, staff and user's training, security measures, disaster control and recovery, protective measures, a substitution programme, conservation treatments, disposal programmes, procedures for reproducing the originals, procedures for exhibition and loan. However, Foot (1999) noted that the UNESCO guidelines do not by any means list all the necessary elements. Preservation policies are living documents that support different institutions; therefore they usually vary according to institutions' needs. That means that each institution should formulate its own preservation policy according to its particularities and goals.

5. A flexible Preservation Policy Maturity Model for Greek Libraries and Archives (P2M2)

In 2008, as part of a PhD research, a nationwide survey regarding the preservation status of the collections of the Public, Municipal, Academic and Bank Libraries as well as the General State Archives in Greece commenced. This survey aimed to clarify the institutions' current preservation actions, policies and overall approach towards preservation. According to the data collected,

- 22,5% of the institutions have a preservation policy for their collections but only 15,3% stated that their policy is formal (written). However, there are numerous preservation actions that could be organized in order to support and formulate a preservation policy.
- 32,5% of the institutions stated that they perform preventive conservation actions and the results in specific measures are even higher, since 88% guides the handling of the collections, 49,3% controls the environmental conditions within the storage areas, 75,3% cleans regularly the storage areas and 70,7% the collections, 57% takes measures in cases of emergency and 30,2% has a disaster plan.
- only 38% of the institutions has assessed the condition of their collections, which is the basis for organizing preservation, and only 17,9% repeats the assessment regularly.
- there is a severe lack of support for remedial conservation treatments, since a sole 12,9% of the institutions perform such treatments, 6% has a conservation lab, whereas 92,2% does not employ a paper conservator.

This first evidence reveal that Greek institutions have deficiencies regarding preservation organization and although they care for their collections, they do not have the proper support for specialized and sophisticated planning that could support them in re-organizing their actions into a coherent preservation policy. It is clear that, since there is currently no national organization that could support libraries and archives in their preservation actions, or a national preservation policy or strategy, institutions will have to take responsibility for organising their preservation actions if they want to maintain their collections for future generations. In this direction, a self-assessment tool plays a central role since it can be a first step towards building a systematic preservation program and a preservation policy. Once the assessment is complete, trouble spots should be obvious and necessary actions will be apparent (Patkus, 2003). The self - assessment tool that was developed out of the aforementioned research, **is** depicted as a preservation maturity model. It seeks to help institutions focus their activities and functions and to assist them in formulating a preservation policy and roadmapping their actions, based on current best practice. It **aims** to acknowledge all preservation actions that are currently not planned, surface all building blocks and route them into a coherent, formal policy by suggesting complimentary actions according to their capacity /maturity level. Its **goal** is to simplify preservation decision-making and guide institutions into managing their actions towards a more meaningful, deliberative preservation policy. A secondary result is that, drafting a preservation policy, will enable the organization access funds and manage available resources more efficiently, since it will include relevant institution's activities, such as surrogacy (digitisation).

6. Embedding benchmarking through survey

P2M2 is addressed to all Greek institutions that care for their collection and support preservation. It can help medium-sized institutions with little preservation experience to organize their actions within a policy and finally to formulate one, to ensure that their collections survive as long as possible in usable condition. However, the tool's implementation is based on the assumption that the institution wants and is capable of improving the care of its collections within known limitations. Understanding current preservation status and the institutions' organisation capabilities and limitations, is the first step to make realistic choices. **P2M2** embeds findings from the research that shows that, **the majority of** :

- institutions have limited resources (both human and equipment) to undertake an in-depth data gathering procedure.
- institutions do not have specialized staff to perform a sophisticated and in-depth condition assessment of their collections.
- staff can not be involved in a time consuming task - therefore the tool is easy and quick to use.

7. Designed for scalability and applicability

P2M2 is designed to be an easy to use instrument, based on a coherent structure that not only diagnoses current preservation status but also provides informed guidance. It is user-friendly, with easy to follow instructions, straightforward questions that use self explained terms and refer to actions that could be performed by no-specialized staff. Moreover, it takes less than an hour to complete and go through the guidance's steps.

The nationwide survey stands as a firm basis for the development and implementation of **P2M2**, since it has conceptualized the institutions' generic preservation profile. The data collected from the survey provided a validated, conceptual framework for its formulation since the categorization and proposed actions are based on the survey's results. It can thus be scaled to and applied by all Greek institutions. It should be noted though, that **P2M2** will be field tested within the next few months and fine-tuned in order to secure its applicability and effectiveness.

P2M2 consists of three assessment steps. The first step '**Organization and resources**' characterises the institution's organizational capacity to support preservation. The second step, "**Collections' Preservation Needs**" tries to provide a frame of necessary preservation actions according to each institution's collections. Finally, the third step concerns the main **Checklist for preservation actions**.

Step1: Organization and resources

Questions at this stage aim at categorising institutions according to their size and organisational maturity in order to support a preservation policy

Step 2: Collections' Preservation Needs

This step aims to understand the institution's preservation needs in order to guide it through its decisions upon preventive and/or remedial conservation and

surrogacy. Based on the results, the tool then suggests the actions that might help in the preservation of the collections.

Step 3: Diagnostic checklist

The Diagnostic checklist is divided into the following topics: 1.Policies and Procedures, 2.Personnel and training, 3.Buildings, 4. Storage and Handling, 5. Emergency planning and recovery and 6. Surrogates.

All diagnostic questions aim to define any existing actions and preservation planning that would categorize institutions according to their maturity to organise and formulate a preservation policy. **P2M2** utilizes a categorisation of three (3) levels in order to classify institutions within a status framework and advise them for their next step towards a best practice approach. The validity of these "subtle benchmarks" should be strengthened through a nation-wide test, which remained outside the scope of this research. After identifying the category they fall under, institutions should follow the tool's guidelines and proceed with the policy cycle from the recommended step onwards. Each step comes with basic action-guide and recommended readings.

8. Concluding remarks

Although libraries and archives have a moral and legal obligation to preserve their collections, the actions taken are limited, comparing with the rest of the institutions' activities. One of the main goals of both the research and the derived tool (P2M2) is to reinforce preservation activities in Greece. To develop a tool for a preservation needs assessment that can be applied on a nation-wide scale can be a difficult undertaking; but, P2M2 is a guide that can address the requirements of small and medium-sized institutions. It is unique because it emerges from the nationwide survey of the preservation status of Greek Libraries and Archives which is its main advantage compared to other self assessment tools that have been developed in other countries before. It should be seen as a first step to raise awareness at a national level and to lead to the development of a benchmark scheme for use in Greek Libraries and Archives. Finally, should it be supported and promoted from professional institutions, it could encourage a unified and effective national preservation policy.

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