

Yvette Burrows
Designation Officer
Resource
16 Queen Anne's Gate
London
SW1H 9AA

30 May 03

Dear Ms Burrows

Re.: Designation Scheme for Museums, Archives and Libraries

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft document setting out the criteria for a cross-domain designation scheme in England. This is the response from the Consortium of University Research Libraries (CURL) (www.curl.ac.uk), which includes 22 of the largest university research libraries across the UK and Ireland, as well as all three UK's national libraries.

CURL welcomes the proposal to extend the Museum Designation Scheme to archives and libraries. The original scheme has brought considerable benefits to the museums that have won approval, and it is expected that the systematic promotion of the most significant archival and library collections by a similar scheme would greatly contribute to raising the profile of the collections both nationally and internationally, thus enhancing the repositories' chances of securing further funding to enhance their physical and digital access to the broadest possible audience.

CURL libraries have however voiced some concerns about the proposed scheme, which, in its present form, seems to be based on a number of criteria that are certainly relevant to museums but would greatly prejudice archives and libraries. A truly cross-domain scheme would require that the following be taken into account:

- Many archival collections, which contain unique material of outstanding significance, are not subject-based but rather:
 - Have a geographical focus, as many archives operate with an acquisition policy based on place (e.g. county);
 - Are organised in particular 'classes' of material which may be dispersed in series through many 'collections' (e.g. manorial records, tithe maps);
- Many archival and library collections, which contain unique material of outstanding significance, are 'narrow' in their remits, as they reflect the interest of one particular significant individual or group (e.g.: writers' papers or the library of such and such Society);
- Local and regional archival and library collections, which contain unique material, are of national importance because local histories are pieces in the national jigsaw, and, of course, there are researchers who specialise in local history;
- As a rule, it is very difficult to find published independent assessments of archival and library collections – another area where the current proposal betrays its museum origin;

- It is not unusual in libraries for archival and library collections of outstanding significance to be deposited (rather than donated or purchased). Would these jointly managed collections be eligible under the scheme?
- The requirement that institutions must apply either as a museum, archive or library seems to indicate a lack of familiarity with the nature of many HE and national libraries, which often hold collections in all three domains; while it is indicated in the present draft that a library could apply for the inclusion of an archival collection as a designated archival – rather than library - collection, it is unclear whether its chances of success would be as high as that of an archive (see introduction of section 2.2);
- Insisting that even minimum standards - ISAD (g), AACR2 level 1, NOF digitise technical standards etc. – be ‘essential’ for eligibility would inevitably result in collections of outstanding importance being missed out by the Scheme; as designation is supposed to be a powerful lever for gaining funding and as the aim of the Scheme is also to raise standards, it would be much more constructive to set as a condition for eligibility a commitment to apply these standards in case of additional funding; many archival and library collections of great importance for research have not yet been catalogued, and their inclusion in the scheme would help the holding institutions to attract funding for their electronic cataloguing following internationally recognised bibliographic standards;

Finally, we have two queries about the proposed scheme:

- Will there be a Designation Challenge Fund (DCF) for the new scheme as there was for the original one? (It is widely recognised that many museum projects would not have gone ahead without DCF funding.)
- Does Resource intend to extend the scheme to the whole of the United Kingdom?

Should you wish to discuss further any of the issues raised in this response, we would ask you to contact, in the first instance, Dr John Hall, Librarian at the University of Durham and Chair of the CURL's Resource Description and Discovery Steering Group. Dr Hall can be contacted on 0191 3342960 or by email at j.t.d.hall@durham.ac.uk.

Kind Regards,

Dr Marie-Pierre Détraz
CURL Executive Secretary