

Universal Declaration on Archives in Canada: Challenges, sustainability and trust

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Summary:

Our presentation will include information on the birth of the Universal Declaration on Archives in Quebec under the name *Déclaration québécoise sur les archives* and it will analyze the reasons for its success in Quebec. We will also summarize challenges faced by the Universal Declaration in Canada and we will share strategies on how to install sustainability and trust as part of an awareness campaign for the endorsement of the Universal Declaration by Canadians.

Text:

The Universal Declaration on Archives was born in Quebec, the Francophone nation in Eastern Canada, under the name *Déclaration québécoise sur les archives*. On April 24th, 2006 the archivists of the province of Quebec proceeded to the launching of this *Quebec Declaration on Archives*. This Declaration recognized the originality, diversity, necessity of archives as well as the responsibility of all in the management of archives. This Quebec Declaration indicated it was incumbent upon society as a whole to foster archives; this collective responsibility was a new approach. The Declaration was a way for 1,000 archivists in Quebec, from three hundred archives centers throughout the province, to symbolically invite the population to support them.

Reasons for success in Quebec

Activities were organized to collect signatures from the public and from institutions invited to sign the Declaration. Archivists asked their users and donators to sign the text. Media were used to promote the Declaration and announce events where to sign the Declaration. Bilingual logos, posters and brochures were distributed to promote the Declaration and get the largest possible number of signatures. A hard-copy Declaration

register to collect signatures for endorsement travelled throughout Quebec with high profile politicians and members of society. An on-line register available in four languages was created to allow electronic signatures at the address:

www.archivistes.qc.ca As a consequence of these promotion and outreach activities, members of religious communities, cultural, historical and genealogical societies as well as staff and users of numerous institutions, including governments, universities, colleges and libraries, signed the Declaration register in person during special events. Towns and municipalities in the Province of Quebec passed resolutions to approve and sign the Declaration. The Declaration was also signed on-line by people in Quebec and outside Quebec unable to access the hard-copy travelling register. Anyone working on records or attached to bodies creating records or the public at large inside and outside Quebec can sign. The Declaration covers all records which the signatories create, receive and preserve. The text refers to everyone's responsibility and creates awareness. The signatories are asked to believe and accept the terms. The Declaration makes a link between the signatories and the heritage of a nation. The text supports principles widely accepted by society (such as democracy and quality of life) as well as by archivists (such as conservation and access). A committee responsible for the promotion of the Declaration was created and is still active. This committee has the mandate to ensure the Declaration reaches the following objectives:

- Make known the importance of records in institutions creating these documents as well as in the development of a collective memory
- Facilitate the involvement of citizens, institutions and governments in the creation, arrangement, preservation and access of records and archives
- Create an environment supporting the increase of resources for the good management of records and archives.

The Declaration connects archivists from Quebec to world wide archivists. It is not a declaration on Quebec archives but a declaration from Quebec about archives. There is no limitation attached to a nation, a group or a territory. There is no limitation on creators

or users. The Quebec Declaration becomes a rallying tool: it connects archivists with citizens, users, decision makers and owners of archival records for the benefit of society.

Challenges faced by the Universal Declaration in Canada

A first challenge is the identification of the most appropriate time to start an awareness campaign. The Universal Declaration should not be associated with any political issues in order to be a way to connect with everyone. The Declaration should be a rallying point independent from political visions. Its endorsement should not be perceived as a potential financial burden or a budget threat by decision-makers. Another challenge is education. Several citizens as well as decision makers and elected representatives do not see clearly the difference between archives and museums, in spite of on-going clarifications coming from archivists. In addition, people need some information on the importance of archives before they even decide to read the Declaration and spend time to really understand its content before endorsing it. Consequently, endorsement of the Declaration must be part of a well planned awareness campaign. A third challenge is the way we are trained to work quietly and competently in the background. Endorsement of the Declaration will ask quiet and competent archivists to come out louder and advocate assertively for archives and for their professional responsibilities.

In order to be successful in getting endorsed the idea that archives are essential as well as successful in changing the traditional public perception of the role of archivists, the archival community needs:

- Energy, drive and determination
- Abilities to work together throughout an entire country for a common goal
- Skills and means to connect with individuals and organizations outside the archival profession

In 2011 and 2012 several individual promotional activities were organized to make known the Declaration in Canada. Copies of the Declaration were sent to archivists, heritage professionals and the media when the Declaration was endorsed by the UNESCO in November 2011. This event was announced on web sites and reported by

several media who interviewed archivists across Canada. We hope to start soon a well organized awareness campaign leading to the endorsement of the Universal Declaration in Canada from coast to coast.

Strategies to install sustainability and trust for the endorsement of the Universal Declaration

Canadian archivists could follow strategies developed in Quebec which they could use as a successful model. These strategies will ensure sustainability and trust by putting archives in the centre of public administration and Canadian society. They will help to preserve archives in the digital age and gain general acceptance of the essential role played by archives and archivists in a climate of change. These are the strategies Canadian archivists could borrow from Quebec for getting the Universal Declaration on Archives endorsed by citizens:

- Identify the appropriate timing for an awareness campaign
- Create a central committee responsible for the promotion of the Declaration; have this committee managed by a national archival association because archival institutions function with considerable rules to protect private information, including lists of signatures
- Ask the committee to create a plan of communication with objectives and resources as well as to develop contacts and activities to facilitate endorsement.
- Develop a register to collect signatures from the ones endorsing the Declaration (an on-line register is essential and can be combined with a hard-copy register)
- Ask the committee to network with local and national groups of archivists, such as associations, to implement activities facilitating endorsement

A number of activities could be organized to facilitate endorsement, such as:

- Holding an archival conference, with workshops, on the theme of endorsing the Declaration
- Getting the Declaration approved by archivists to make the entire profession endorse the Declaration, as well as approved by traditional partners such as records managers, librarians, genealogists and curators
- Holding events to launch the Declaration and get signatures from participants, such as open houses in local archives, or other events to reach citizens at large and allow them to connect with archives
- Circulating the hard-copy register to collect signatures and promote the on-line register
- Having the Declaration approved by influential leaders and decision-makers, such as mayors and executive assistants, government elected representatives, school boards, colleges and universities presidents and executive assistants, government employees

In order to reach citizens, local committee members should send letters and organize events and meetings to present the Declaration and obtain signatures for endorsement. In addition, the local committee members may have to tour their region and work with media to promote signature events. They should also ask the highest elected officials, including Ministers responsible for heritage, to present the Declaration to their level of government. In order to reach them, local or national committee members will send letters and organize meetings to present the Declaration to these officials who will present it later, as a motion, to their government, for example on National or International Archives Day.

A number of the following important points should be mentioned when promoting the Declaration with leaders, decision makers and elected officials as well as the general public:

- There is a strong network of archivists in the region and the country.
- Archivists form national and international associations. Archivists are professionals.
- Archivists are well connected with other heritage partners, such as curators and genealogists, and with other information professionals, such as records managers and librarians. This entire network shares common ground and endorses the Declaration.
- The endorsement is an awareness movement for archives throughout the region or the country.

In conclusion, the Universal Declaration on Archives was endorsed by the UNESCO in November 2011. It is now up to us, archivists, to raise still further awareness of archives among the general public and decision makers. The Declaration is the tool which will help us to give archives the place they deserve in our modern society and in a digital changing world.

The ICA developed a Declaration on-line register to collect signatures. Let us all use it as a base from which to spread endorsement at national and international levels.