

Disrupting description: implementing the Australian Series system in AccesstoMemory (AtoM)

Challenge – to move from a proprietary archival management system used by three organisations, to one which was more open and with greater longevity.

Government archives in Australia use some form of the Australian Series registration system, which uses functional series as the main descriptive entity, rather than fonds.

Systems designed outside of Australia use fonds.

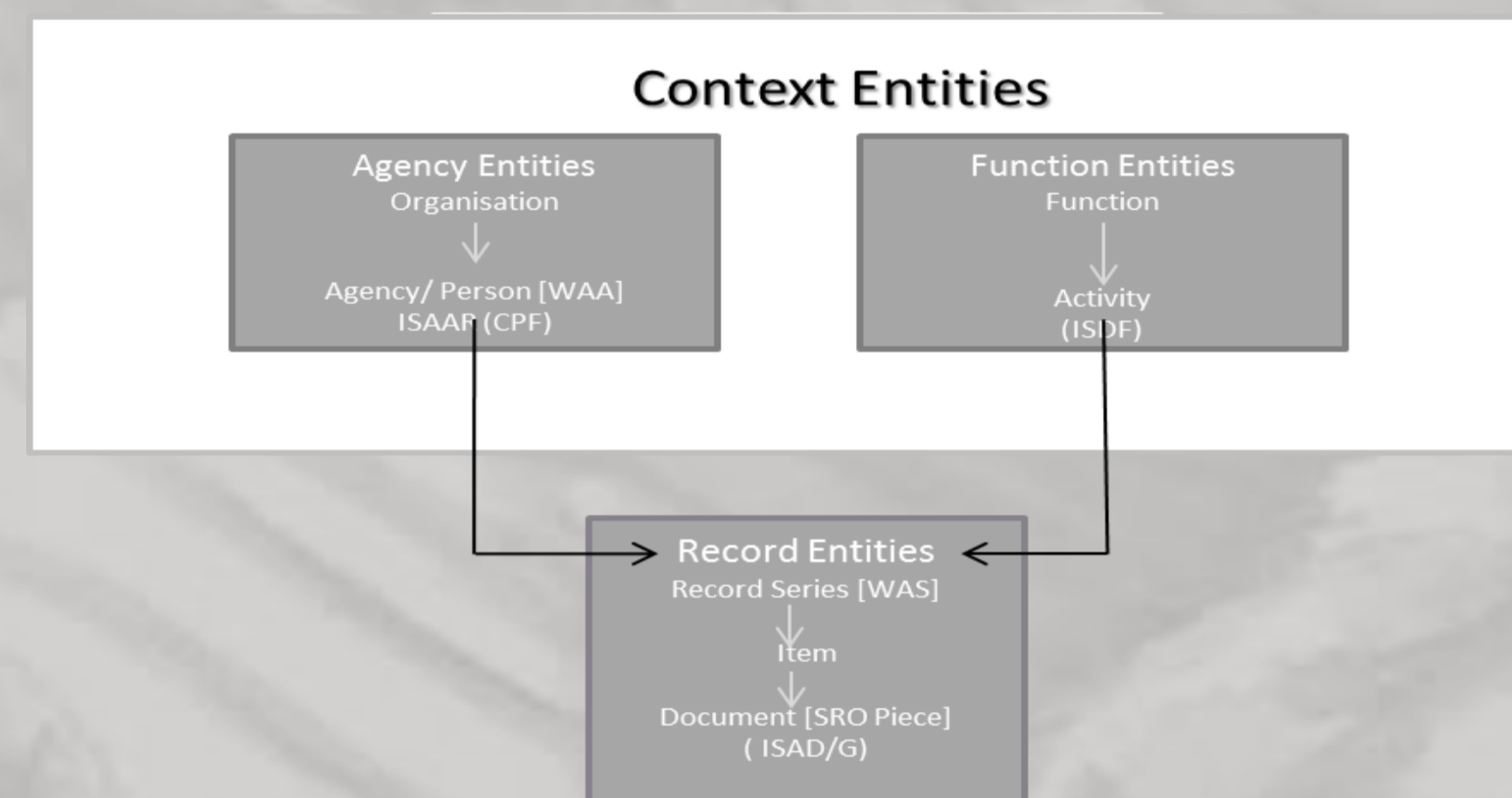
Other standards supported by AtoM

RAD EAD Dublin Core MODS /MARC

Why **NOT** the Australian Series Registration System?

Conceptually ...

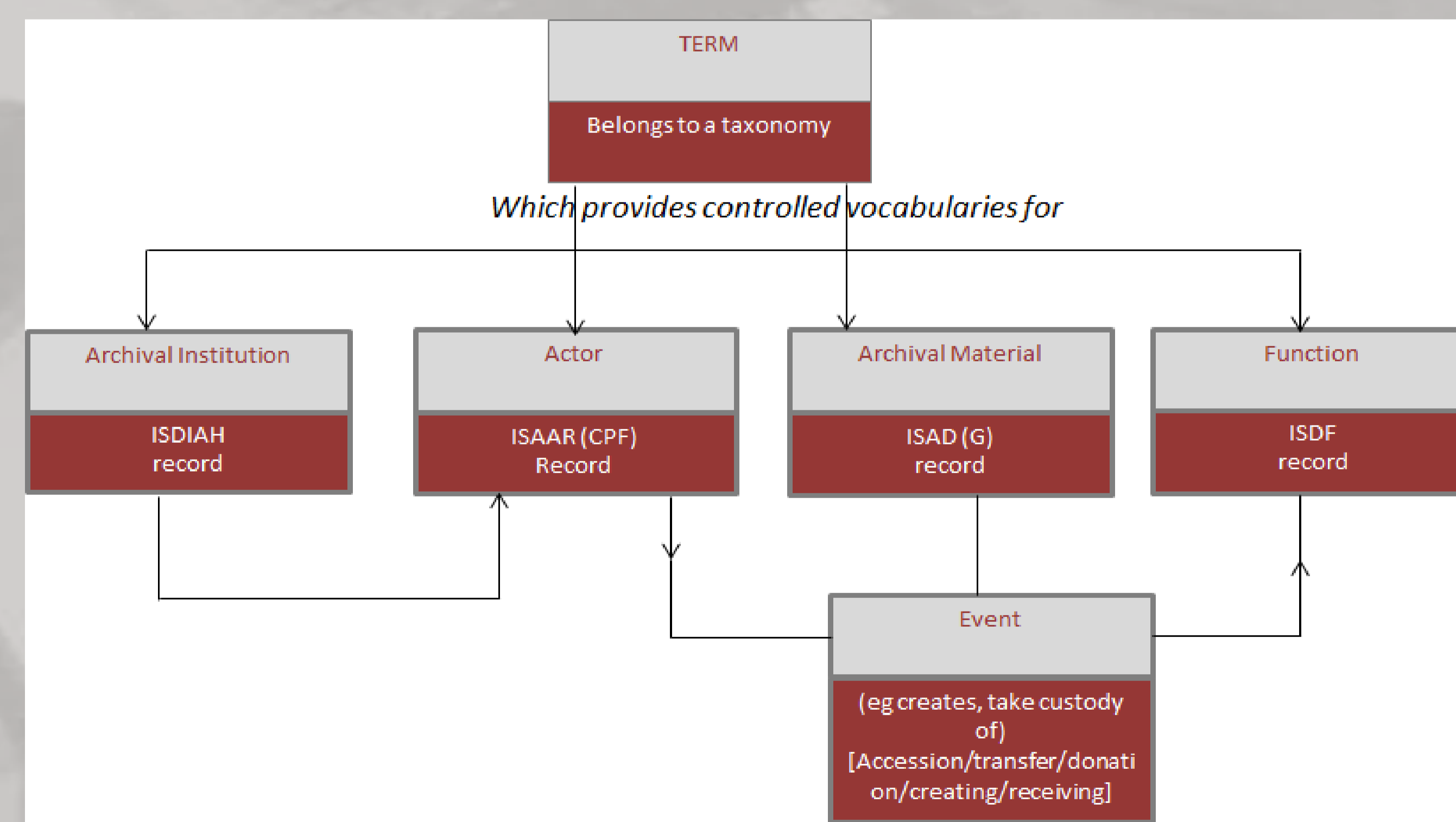
Series System



The principles of the Australian Series system description requires at least two descriptive entities:

- 1 **Context Control**, which is achieved by the identification and registration of records creating and other ambient entities and the documentation of the administrative and biographical histories of those entities, their functional responsibilities and their relationships with each other and with the recordkeeping systems they maintain(ed).
- 2 **Records Control**, which is achieved by the identification, registration and documentation of record series and/or the items that make up those series.

AccesstoMemory



AtoM is designed around the ICA's internationally approved descriptive standards ISAD (G), ISAAR, ISDF, and ISDIAH, but appeared flexible enough to accommodate practices based on local descriptive standards, such as the Australian series system used by the State Records Office of WA

... this should be easy...

Look Ma, no fonds

The Australian Series system was developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s by Peter Scott and Ian McLean of the Australian Commonwealth archives. They recognised that the complexities of the Australian government system, with rapidly changing portfolios and ministries, meant that a fonds based approach would mean multiple entries, often for records which were created to meet the same administrative and functional purposes. By focusing on the records and recognising continuity by function, they could identify multiple creating and controlling entities for each series. Series description relies on contextual information about the creator(s), 'thick' description as to scope and content of the series, and 'thin' description at item level.

Let's talk Strine

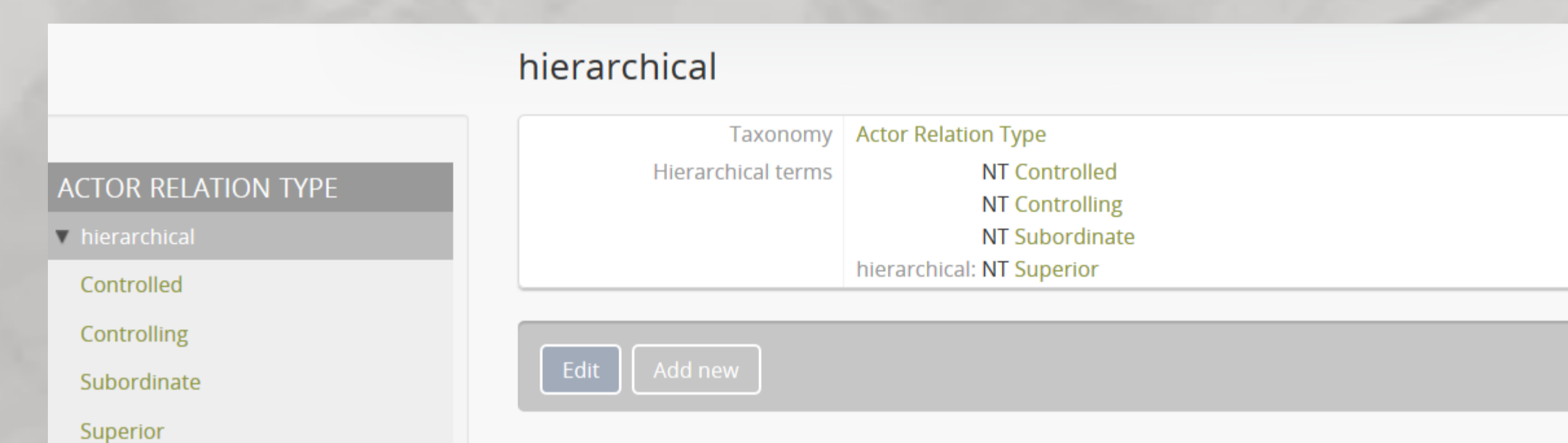
ISAD(G), which AtoM uses as the template for all levels of archival description, requires that the highest level of description should be a fonds description. US and Canadian description standards concentrate on individual letters and documents – items. Fonds and items, as individual objects, are coded into AtoM. Australian and Western Australian parlance is slightly different. In addition to changing the highest level of description from fonds to series, we needed:

- Consignment – list of items transferred as part of an accession in accordance with an approved disposal authority or the SRO's collection policy. Consignments may contain items from one or more series of records.
- **Item - A discrete unit in a recordkeeping system or, in the archival context, within a series, such as a document or file, that is treated as a unit for control and retrieval. (NAA, 2013)**
- Piece – component of an item, such as a photograph in an album or letter on a file. (cf <http://www.ciscra.org/mat/termdb/term/213>)

To change that, we invented a new language – en_AU.

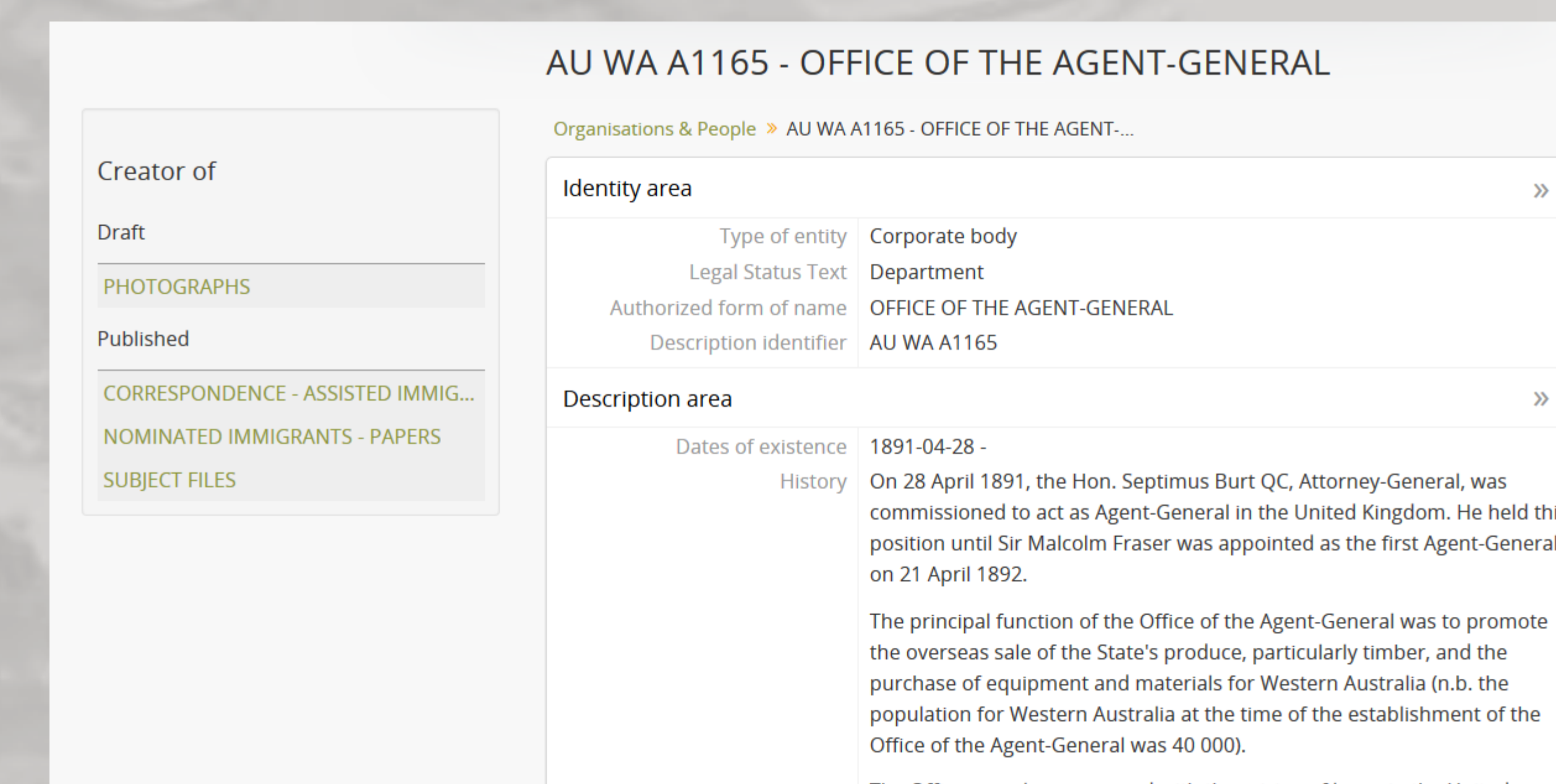
Relationships matter

The other thing that Series Registration does that the ICA standards do not, is set up relationships between series as well as between archival authorities. AtoM has the four relationship types allowed for in ISAAR-CPF in the taxonomies: associative, hierarchical, temporal and relational. We modified these types to include the relationship types identified in series, and linked them to actors and descriptions. Not only that, but we made sure that they were reciprocal. We also linked event types across both types of description. This provides for a much richer contextual description.



Yours fondly?

As the result of this work, we believe that we have a different way of recognising and describing fonds; one that is based on the series that we hold in the collection, as well as those we know are being created. We can take a snap shot in time to see who was responsible for what, when.



References Australian Society of Archivists (2005) Describing archives in context; International Council on Archives (2008) ISAAR- CPF, ISAD(G), ISDF
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