

# Standards — who needs them?

## An analysis of diversity in Australian Government standards for Archaeology Data Capture



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### Introduction

The FAIMS project was established in 2012 to develop eResearch tools to improve archaeological data management. While it is not a goal to improve standards per se, it is essential that the project accommodates minimum standards and guidelines which govern archaeological practice in Australia. As part of the stocktaking phase, we conducted a preliminary review of all available documentation affecting excavation, survey and artefact analysis from each state.

The vast majority of archaeological work in Australia is carried out by consultant archaeologists assisting developers and site owners to comply with heritage planning and environmental protection legislation. This work is guided not only by principles enshrined in the acts themselves, but also the policies, manuals, supporting documents and in some cases, prescriptive templates and recording sheets. Most of the latter apply to site identification and survey rather than excavation recording.

### Australian Government Standards for Data Capture

Australian Archaeological practice is governed by nine separate jurisdictions of federal, state and local governments. Indigenous, historical and maritime archaeological resources are subject to different legislation and often managed by different departments and agencies in each state. In recent years, legislation in most states has been under review and there have been several new guidelines issued. Ministries change, funding and political interest wane, and there is a significant variation in minimum standards for archaeological recording across the country.

In addition to compliance guidelines, archaeological associations including the Australasian Archaeological Association (AAA) and the Australian Association of Consulting Archaeologists Incorporated (AACAI), issue their own codes of ethics.



The policies and documents persist at several levels. Predominantly, they are concerned by broader matters of archaeological methodology (including liaison with stakeholders and community members), excavation strategies, reporting and transfer of archive records. Some make direct reference to methods and minimum contents and quality of data recording. Some agencies have taken the lead, and deployed their own specialised mobile data recording solutions (namely NSW Office of the Environment's AHIMS data recording app).

### What we have been doing?

We have been compiling statutes, guidelines, recording sheets and glossaries that affect archaeological data recording, alongside examples of actual recording sheets used by archaeologists in the field. Concepts in the sample of five excavation recording sheets have been mapped to reveal a minimum number of 95 concepts for excavation, 80% of which were used on more than one recording sheet. Each sheet used no more than 40 each. This work will be extended to other recording sheets and will form the basis of a primary vocabulary used to define (and connect) schemas in the mobile device for collection archaeological data in the field.

### Mapped concepts

acidity area bonding butted butts  
 classes coarse code colour  
 comments components composition  
 conditions constituents contains  
 context cut deposit depth  
 description diameter discussion  
 extent finds fine grid height  
 inclusions interpretation  
 location method NOS numbers  
 photographs plan  
 recorded sample section  
 sediment site soil special structural  
 thickness total typeweight width

Labels on excavation recording sheets



### How will the FAIMS mobile app handle 'standards'?

We'll expect there to be many standards! This is why we have developed a flexible and extensible recording system underpinned by concept sharing. We know there will never be one standard that fits all, and expectations of legislators may change as frequently as the research designs of academic archaeologists. The FAIMS mobile app will not expect one definition of the term 'site'. It will expect that many users may have different definitions of the term 'site' and allow them to select between them. We will work with agencies wherever possible to supply 'off-the-shelf' recording systems customised to each jurisdiction. What will underlie these all is a common definition of core concepts that will be managed independently of the data recording and revised over time, as required.

With respect to data recording methods, FAIMS will design the mobile application to capture all possible kinds of recording hardware. For example, new Victorian Aboriginal guidelines require <1m accuracy when plotting GPS coordinates. The app allows use of a differential GPS and will report the level of accuracy at any given point of data capture.

### How can I help?

Send your sample recording forms, or datasets, to [penny@fedarch.org](mailto:penny@fedarch.org).

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