

RDA and the RDA Toolkit

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Received: 19 June 2026 | Published: 22 June 2026

ABSTRACT

For more than a decade, RDA has been a globally recognised and applied standard for cataloguing collections in cultural institutions. From the start RDA established itself as a unique standard, one seeking to be international in its usage and available exclusively online through the RDA Toolkit. These goals were bold and widely questioned initially.

This article describes the development of RDA from its beginnings to the present day. It covers the evolution of the content of the standard as well as its governance and publication format.

The article also looks forward to further developmental work that will improve processes and better support users of RDA and the entire cataloguing/metadata community.

KEYWORDS RDA; AACR2; RDA Toolkit

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Where we come from

Over the years, libraries have tried to organise and document their collections. This is still the case today, yet much has changed. In the beginning, cataloguing was the most important concern. There was no thought of exchanging information about one's own institution. It was not until the end of the 19th century that the professional library world began to consider this kind of exchange, but always within its own linguistic and cultural sphere. In the middle of the 20th century as collections expanded and also grew more complex, this process became increasingly relevant, and technological advances made possible projects that no one had previously considered.

Initially developed within different language spheres, there was a growing desire to carry out such projects worldwide, and international cooperation was sought. But how could the language barriers be overcome? It seemed obvious to look for English-language rules, as the English language would be applicable in many communities. The *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules. 2nd edition (AACR2)* ([Joint Steering Committee for Revision of AACR, 1978-](#)) were considered suitable at the time. They were first published in 1978, built on the previous *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR)*

published in 1967 ([Joint Steering Committee for AACR, 1967](#)), and were regularly updated until 2005.

At the same time, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) developed new models for standardisation, which were intended to serve as an international basis for cataloguing in libraries. The simultaneous development of technologies that enabled data to be networked paved the way for a more efficient transfer of information.

In view of these fundamental changes and the expanded possibilities, the effectiveness of many existing standards worldwide had to be questioned at the end of the 20th century. The Joint Steering Committee (JSC), the committee responsible for AACR2, also addressed this issue and came to the conclusion that rather than simply continuing to update AACR2 a wholly new standard was needed in order to fully address the cataloguing challenges facing libraries.

AACR2 saw its final update in 2005, while work began on the new standard, *Resource Description and Access* (RDA). The original developers of RDA established goals that the standard should be optimised for use in the digital world, available primarily through a website, and seek out international adoption. RDA was first published in the RDA Toolkit website in 2010. In the subsequent years the responsible bodies also changed their names, and from then on, the RDA Board and the RDA Steering Committee (RSC) were responsible for the new RDA standard.

What happened next

The user communities around the world that had already been working with AACR2 were the first to adopt the new standard. However, new communities, such as the German-speaking community, also began to use RDA for cataloguing. Within its first five years the Toolkit had added translations in French, German, Spanish, and Finnish, as well as policy statements from the US, the UK, and the German Language community. In this way we can say that the RDA Toolkit became multilingual.

The original RDA standard still drew significantly from its predecessor AACR2, and as users transitioned to RDA it became clear to the Non-English-speaking user communities that RDA, despite its international intentions, had an Anglo-American flavour that was impossible to overlook and which made implementation in other cultural contexts difficult.

The RDA Board and the RSC took these concerns on board and soon after its initial publication, the standard underwent a fundamental revision. The RDA Toolkit Restructure and Redesign (3R) project was carried out from 2016 to 2020 with the goals of making RDA fully compatible with the *IFLA Library Reference Model* (IFLA LRM) ([Riva, Le Bœuf and Žumer, 2018](#)), further optimising the standard for linked data environments, redesigning the Toolkit for improved scalability and reducing Anglo-

American bias within the standard ([RDA Steering Committee and ALA Digital Reference, 2021](#)). The results were published in 2020 as the new Official RDA ([ALA Digital Reference, 2019-](#)). The Original RDA online tool was made available in parallel ([ALA Digital Reference, 2012-2027](#)).

Following the 3R project, RDA became significantly more useful to an international user community and now offers numerous options designed to meet the requirements of different traditions and cultural backgrounds. However, this flexibility also requires greater involvement on the part of user communities, who now have to evaluate the many options available to meet their needs.

Diversity in unity

Despite all the improvements, it was not easy for many user communities to apply the changed standard. The structure of the standard had changed from that of a manual to one that was more like a data dictionary. Many have had difficulty navigating the new Toolkit and understanding the new concepts that were introduced in 3R. Above all, there was initially great uncertainty about how to implement the new possibilities, especially the many options. After the 3R project, Official RDA was no longer a standard that could be applied one-to-one. Experts, cataloguers and trainers alike were unsure whether this new concept could be applied in practice in their contexts. The RSC and publishers of RDA took action to respond to these concerns, offering free webinars to introduce new concepts and developing online courses that took a deeper dive into how to navigate the Toolkit and address the decisions required to implement the standard. The RSC created a new position within the RSC to more effectively address education and orientation issues. This new role resulted in a survey of cataloguing educators and trainers, a report of those results, and new documentation for introducing RDA to new cataloguers and existing staff ([Sze, 2022](#)). The main aim was to clarify that RDA is now a framework standard for cataloguing and cannot be implemented in practice without interpretation and adaptation by user communities.

Gradually, different approaches to applying the standard were developed, so that today we have a colourful picture of different implementations worldwide, all of which are based on RDA as a framework standard and thus on the IFLA LRM. Some user communities continue to document their local requirements, as in the Original Toolkit, through policy statements. Others describe the application for practical cataloging in manuals which are managed outside the RDA Toolkit. In addition, the approach to translations has also adapted to new circumstances. Many user communities, especially those with cataloguers who have a good knowledge of English, do without a complete translation and limit themselves to offering only the RDA Registry in their language. It has also become apparent that in individual communities it makes perfect sense to initially apply RDA only to a specific area of their publications, or to proceed step by step in order to limit and distribute the implementation effort.

These different approaches to using RDA may seem confusing at first, but they are precisely in line with the approach taken in the 3R project, which made it possible to give the RDA standard a truly international character ([Figure 1](#)).

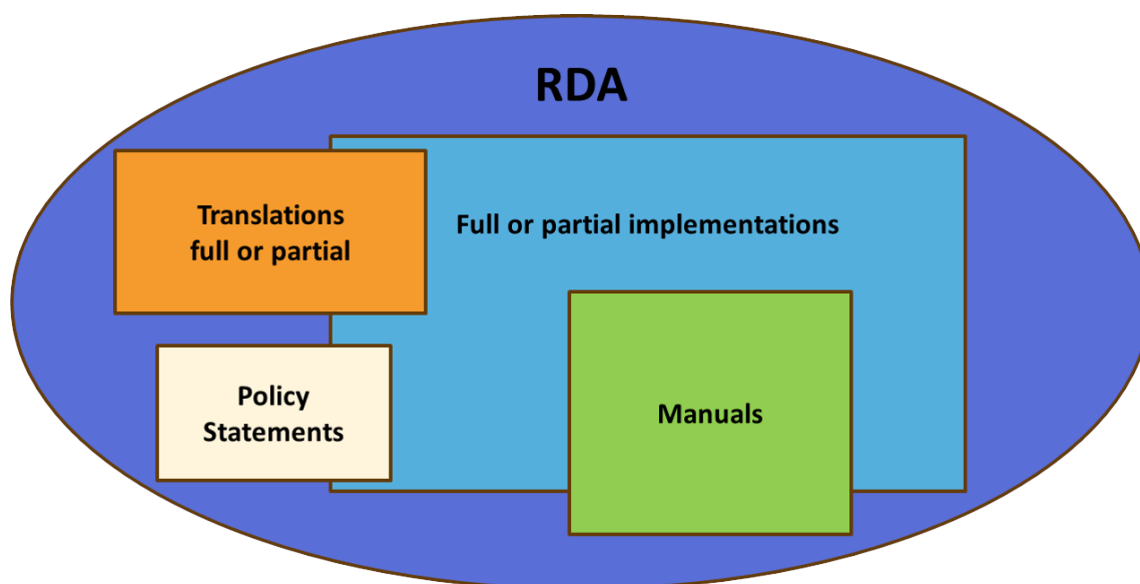


Figure 1 RDA implementations

How will the RDA standard continue to develop?

A standard is never finished and must necessarily adapt to changing circumstances. The RSC has developed a fixed and sustainable organisational structure for this purpose ([Welsh, 2025](#)). In addition to the positions of Chair, Secretary and ALA Representative, there are representatives responsible for training and education, for examples, for technical implementation and for the different regions of the world. The Regional Representatives play a very important role. Only through them is it possible to keep the standard truly international and to incorporate the needs of different cultural groups. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, there are currently no representatives from Africa and Asia in the RSC. However, these regions also have a permanent contact person at the RSC in the form of the Wider Community Engagement Officer, and the structure is in place to accept these regions into the RSC when the time is right. In contrast, all regions are represented on the RDA Board.

Another important component are the RSC Working Groups on specific topics ([RDA Steering Committee, 2026b](#)). Here, the needs of the respective specialist community are discussed and incorporated into the overall context. These working groups are open to colleagues with relevant expertise from all regions of the world and from different institutions. The work here is facilitated by virtual meetings, and colleagues can contribute on an ongoing basis. The working groups have a fixed mandate from the RSC, which is supplemented by additional mandates as required. [Figure 2](#) shows how the work of the working groups feeds into the RSC.

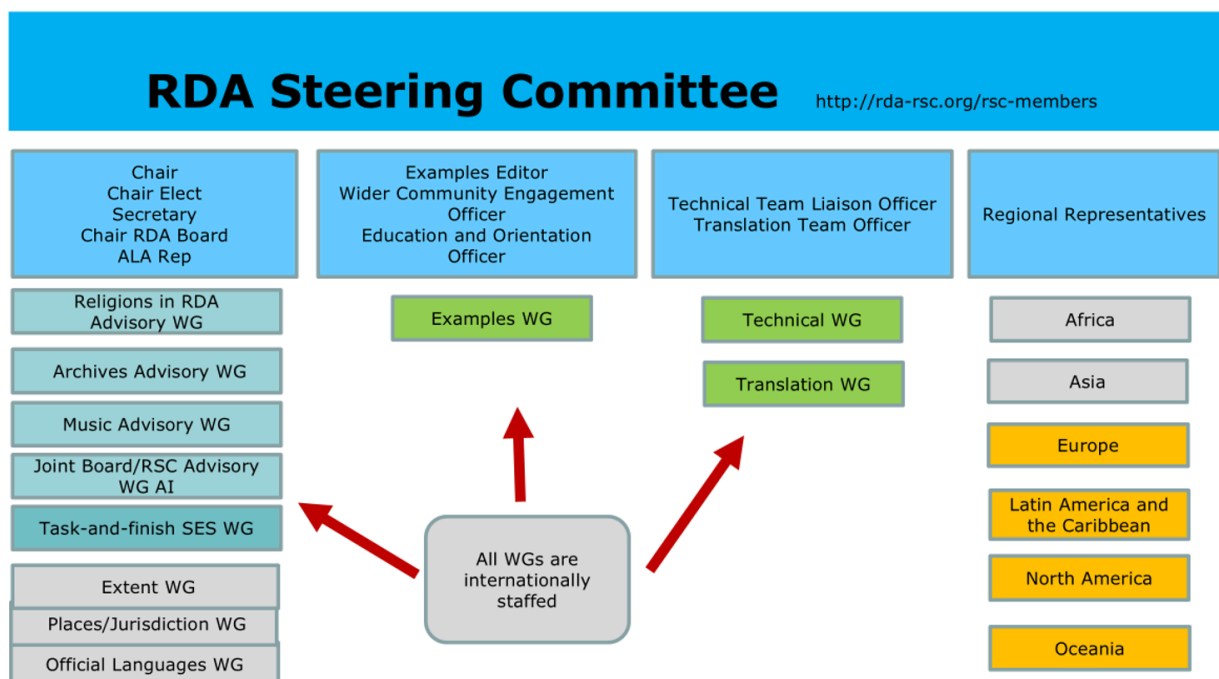


Figure 2 How working groups feed into the RSC

Proposed changes from all regions can be submitted to the RSC using a formal revision process ([RDA Steering Committee, 2023](#)). They are then discussed and voted on by the RSC on a quarterly basis and subsequently incorporated into the RDA Toolkit in regular releases.

In order to keep the RDA standard truly international and compatible, there are official protocols with other international institutions such as the IFLA Committee on Standards, the ISSN International Centre, the MARC Advisory Committee and the BIBFRAME Community ([RDA Steering Committee, 2026a](#)). Only through cooperation can the modern challenges to standards be overcome and global data exchange be made possible and sustainable. It is important that all players adhere to the basic models and principles so that compatibility can be guaranteed. Figure 3 shows where RDA sits in relation to the Statement of International Cataloguing Principles (ICP) ([Galeffi et al, 2017](#)), the LRM, and local cataloguing contexts.

Examples of local contexts given in the figure are the *ISBD for Manifestation* (ISBDM) ([International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2025](#)), *Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (RDA Edition)* (DCRMR) ([Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Bibliographic Standards Committee, 2026](#)), the *Metadata Guidance Documentation* (MGD) from the Library of Congress's Program for Cooperative Cataloging (LC-PCC) ([Library of Congress Program for Cooperative Cataloging, 2026](#)) and the Policy Statements created by a range of cataloguing communities, including the British Library, Libraries and Archives Canada, the National Library of New Zealand, the Music Library Association and, as discussed

elsewhere in this special issue (Grzegorski, 2026), the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries.

RDA and the Official Toolkit are well positioned to adapt and grow in accordance with International Cataloguing Principles and fulfill its core mission of creating bibliographic metadata that can be shared internationally.

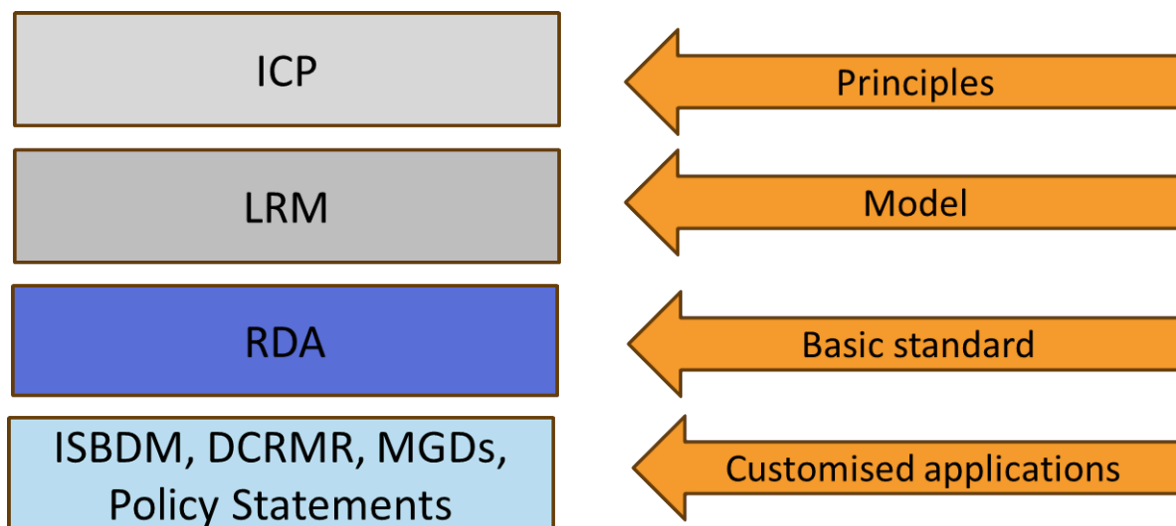


Figure 3 RDA's position in relation to the International Statement of Cataloguing Principles (ICP), the IFLA Library Reference Model (LRM) and local cataloguing contexts

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