

Deaccessioning Notes, Policies and Procedures

Getting Started on Deaccessioning

Deaccessioning is the process of de-registering an object from the collection for clearly stated reasons, and disposing of it in accordance with approved policies and procedures.

Deaccessioning is an important exercise for museums, particularly those with collections that have grown through donations, and where few offers of donation have been refused. Many collections have accumulated without the guidance of a collection policy or a clear sense of the purpose of the museum. In the past museums were sometimes reluctant to refuse a donation, resulting in collections that now need review and a clearer focus. Just as our houses need to be spring cleaned and de-cluttered from time to time, so museum collections need to be culled to remove things that on reflection have limited significance. This process will free up space and resources for more important objects and more strategic acquisitions.

Caution and transparency in the deaccessioning process are essential. There are instances where museums and galleries have deaccessioned items and collections that were subsequently recognised as important and valuable. However most mistakes occur through a lack of clear policies and adequate discussion and consultation. A breathing space of 12 months between the deaccessioning decision and disposal is a wise safeguard, particularly if there is some disagreement among museum members about the significance of the items proposed for deaccessioning. In cases where there is no disagreement, or the item is in poor condition, the 12-month period of review can be waived.

Sound deaccessioning decisions are best made by a committee, using the significance assessment criteria and the collection policy as a framework for careful review and assessment.

Consider holding a discussion about deaccessioning by asking museum members to each review the collection and identify 10 objects they think could be removed from the collection. Circulate the deaccessioning policies and ask each person to explain why they have chosen the objects on their list. Pin up each list and compare and contrast items on the list. Consider large items, objects in poor condition and obvious duplicates as a priority.

The following prompt questions may help guide compilation of the list.

Is the item relevant to the mission and purpose of the museum?

Does it tell a story about life in the district? Is it provenanced to the area?

How does the item relate to key themes in the collection?

What kind of research or contextual information does the museum have about the item, for example photographs of the item or similar items in use?

Is it complete and in good condition?

Is it significant and why?

Does the museum have other items like it? Is it likely that the museum can acquire a better example such as an item that has a provenance or story? Do other museums in the district have similar items of better quality?

Is it likely to be displayed and in what context? Does it make an interesting object for exhibition?

Is the item part of a group of things that have the potential to create an interesting display that tells a story about life in the district?

Can the museum properly store and care for the object?

8. Deaccessioning Policy and Procedures – these can be incorporated into the museum’s collection policy

8.1 Deaccessioning is the process of de-registering an object from the collection for clearly stated reasons, and disposing of it in accordance with approved policies and procedures. Caution and transparency are essential in the deaccessioning process.¹

8.2 To deaccession an object from the collection the item should be assessed against the museum’s mission, the collection policy and themes, and the assessment criteria.

8.3 The criteria for deaccessioning include:

- Little or no significance – using the assessment process and significance criteria

- This includes poor condition and lack of provenance

- Also consider:

- Duplication – either within the collection or other collections in the district

- Inability to safely store and manage the object

- Lack of relevance to collection themes and policy

- Lack of relevance to the museum’s mission and purpose

¹ For more information on deaccessioning see the fact sheet on the MGNSW web site and

8.4 Raising money for the museum through the sale of deaccessioned items is not a valid reason for deaccessioning.

8.5 In identifying priority items for deaccessioning, the museum should first consider large items that take up storage and display space, objects in poor condition, or items that are hazardous or that create particular problems for management or visitors.

8.6 In exceptional circumstances, items may be deaccessioned where the object is of particular cultural significance and its return will support the maintenance and renewal of cultural traditions.²

8.7 Where there is concern or disagreement about the significance and relevance of items proposed for deaccessioning, the museum may hold items for a period of 12 months before disposal. The list of items proposed for deaccessioning should be available to museum members for comment.

8.8 Items proposed for deaccessioning should be formally approved by the museum's management committee.

8.9 A short statement should be prepared indicating why the object is being deaccessioned and a photo taken. Keep this information, and a note about the method of disposal, in a register of all deaccessioned objects.

Method of Disposal

8.10 There are four main methods of disposal:

- Return to the donor
- Transfer to another museum
- Destruction
- Sale

8.11 In the first instance, the donor of the object, if known, should be informed and offered the item, with an explanation of why it is to be deaccessioned. Return the item to the donor if they wish to have the object back.

8.12 Alternatively, deaccessioned items may be transferred to another institution. If items are transferred to another institution, the museum should ensure the item is appropriate to the organisation's mission and collection policy and that they have the resources to manage the item.

8.13 In other cases, where the item is incomplete, in poor condition, and of no value, it may be destroyed or sent to the tip.

² There are cases where museums have deaccessioned a family bible or christening robe where the family wanted to maintain the tradition of wearing the robe or entering family names in the bible. These decisions can be made by considering the context and people to whom the object has most significance. In such cases the museum may need to consider the views of members of the family.

8.14 Deaccessioned items may be sold through public auction or other appropriate method.

8.15 All funds raised through the sale of deaccessioned items should be put into a collection development or acquisition fund, or be reserved for collection conservation.

8.16 Note the reasons for deaccessioning in the register and catalogue. Draw a line through the object in the register or the card catalogue. Do not delete the record.

8.17 No members, volunteers, staff, or committee members, or their relatives, may benefit or in any way acquire objects that have been deaccessioned.

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