

# Deaccession and disposal

Deaccessioning is the formal process of removal of an object from the collection register, catalogue or database.

Disposal is the physical removal of the object from the organisation by the process decided upon by the collections or acquisition committee.

Deaccessioning is part of collection management. Just as an organisation should have an accession or acquisition policy they should also have a deaccession policy which addresses why and how deaccessioned material will be disposed of.

## Why deaccession?

There are number of reasons why an organisation will consider deaccession:

- a collections policy has been developed or revised since the object was acquired;
- the collecting focus has been refined or altered;
- the object is a duplicate;
- the object has been damaged or slowly deteriorated over time and the costs of conservation outweigh the value to the collection;
- the object can no longer be suitably stored by the organisation;
- the object should be returned to the Aboriginal, Torres Strait or other community group from which it came;
- the original owner/donor's relative has proven legal title to it, e.g. the donor's Will states that it is to go to her son and the museum does not hold a deed of gift.

## The deaccession procedure

Before an organisation removes an object from the collection, it's important to ensure the members endorse this activity. The collection policy should note that deaccession and disposal is an option and a possibility. Even if an organisation does not wish to take on this task, it should also be noted in the collections policy.

## Who decides?

According to Museums Australia's Code of Ethics for Art, History & Science Museums, 1999, p.7 [6.5]

*A decision to dispose of any object should be the responsibility of the governing body of the museum, not of the curator of the collection concerned acting alone.*

Recommendations should go to the director and board or collections/acquisitions committee of the organisation. They make the final decision.

All acquisition and deaccession decisions should be based on the collections policy. If an organisation does not have either of these documents, they should be written before any action takes place. It is also useful to carry out significance assessment to assist in the decision-making process.

## The deaccession process

Use the following steps as a guide.

- Identify and list the objects you would like to deaccession.
- Check museum records, such as donor and date of acquisition, for any information on the objects if not already known.
- Fully list objects with any known relevant information for presentation to the collections or curatorial committee consideration, including a recommendation.

## Your recommendation should include the following:

- Accession number (if one exists) and description
- Provenance
- Advice on legal status of object
- Reason for deaccession
- Any additional information you have from advisers regarding value, etc

## Recommended method of disposal

If the committee agrees to deaccession, cross the object off all museum records such as card catalogue, accession register, object files or computer database (mark status as deaccessioned with date deaccession was approved). Remember to record the fate of the object in the accession register for future museum workers and don't reuse the deaccessioned object's number.

Place object in the 'Deaccessioned Items' area of your storeroom for a recommended 'cooling off period' of at least 12 months. This time is provided to allow any further information about the object to come to light, such as relevance, value, provenance, etc.

During this time, you may act on the committee's recommendation for method of disposal by contacting donors, other institutions, etc.

After the cooling off period, dispose of the object following the hierarchy of methods of disposal as per the recommendation.

Develop a file, register or database of deaccessioned items with detailed information including a photograph for future reference.

## Methods of disposal

Disposal is the physical removal of the object from the museum. This can be done in a number of ways and usually they are attempted through this order:

- Return the object to the donor, if donor is in agreement.
- If you can't find a record of the donor, draw on the memory of past employees, volunteers, board or committee members to try and establish the missing information. If this still isn't established and the organisation wishes to continue the process, every effort must be made to establish the provenance and the donor's identity. The committee needs to ensure that a 'reasonable amount of effort and period of time' is undertaken in trying to trace the donor, e.g. four attempts to contact the donor by letter or phone call, and /or placing an ad in the local paper.
- Transfer the object to another institution if one can be located willing to accept the object. This would be an institution with a similar collecting area, eg: if a maritime related object, a maritime museum would be most appropriate.
- Sell the object at public auction or by tender. This ensures the fair market price for an object. People connected with the museum should not be allowed to purchase deaccessioned items (this should be noted in the deaccession policy). The funds generated from such sales should be transferred into the acquisition budget so that items of greater significance to the organisation may be purchased in the future, or for other purposes such as conservation work for important collection items.
- Destruction – only be considered for an object if it were in very poor condition, had irreparable damage, etc. Destruction refers to a situation whereby the object would be simply placed in the bin.

Ensure that all decisions and actions are fully documented and recorded so that if any queries are made about the object in the future, it is possible to answer those queries with an informed perspective.

Any questions regarding deaccessioning can be directed to the M&G NSW staff.