

South Africa and the international SPECTRUM of museum standards

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Introduction:

At present South Africa does not have an accreditation scheme or set standards with which its museums must comply to secure such recognition. Certainly, establishing and monitoring an accreditation scheme is a time consuming process, as is developing and implementing standards within museums. Yet, this paper suggests that in spite of such logistical constraints, stricter adherence to international museum standards and the introduction of an accreditation scheme that encourages this practice would bring numerous benefits to South Africa's museums. These advantages extend beyond ensuring that museum collections are carefully preserved and well managed. They also offer possibilities for professionalising our sector, attracting competent young people to pursue a long-term career in museums and for making South Africa a more active player within the international museum community. This paper argues, moreover, that South Africa might consider adopting the already established and internationally recognised SPECTRUM standard for museum collections management as the basis for developing a future accreditation scheme.

Accreditation schemes worldwide:

There are several countries worldwide that operate museum accreditation schemes. Some of the most established programmes are run in the United Kingdom, USA-Canada and Australia. The Arts Council of England administers the UK accreditation scheme, which has been in operation since 1988. Currently there are almost 1,800 museums participating in this scheme, which, The Arts Council of England claims, have led the way in raising museum standards in the UK.¹ The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) oversees another accreditation scheme that "offers high profile, peer-based validation of [a] museum's operations and impact" in which museums from across the USA, Canada and Puerto Rico participate.² Museums Australia runs a two tiered Museum Accreditation Program (MAP) for their country that accommodates both museums with paid staff, and museums with voluntary staff or a single paid staff member. Again, their intention is that MAP provides a framework to improve the

¹ "Accreditation Scheme," Arts Council England, accessed 16 October 2012, <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme/>

² "Accreditation," American Alliance of Museums, accessed 16 October 2012, <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/assessment-programs/accreditation>

operations and increase the profile of museums in Australia.³ Based on its complex history and colonial experience, South Africa may have alternative interpretations as to what constitutes raised standards and impacts in its museums and place greater emphasis on some areas of museum management than the UK, USA and Australian accreditation schemes do. However, the desire to improve the management of collections for the enjoyment and benefit of the public, which motivates these accreditation schemes, is surely a sentiment equally shared by museums in South Africa.

Accreditation schemes can offer participants numerous tangible benefits. In the process of working towards accreditation, museums develop a performance quality standard that allows them to make efficient assessments, reward achievements and drive further improvements. Measures are put in place to raise the profile of the museum through increased understanding and awareness, which builds both credibility and confidence in the institutions. User needs and interests become a priority. Procedures and policies are formalised as part of the process. In demonstrating commitment to a national standard, many museums in the UK and USA have stated that being an accredited institution improves their chance of making successful grant applications and in attracting patronage from other investors. As well, accreditation has facilitated and strengthened partnerships between museum organisations.^{4 5}

International museum standards:

While a carefully conceived South African museum accreditation scheme could elicit similar benefits for its participants, it is possible, in the meantime, to enjoy some of these advantages simply by demonstrating an obvious commitment to implementing recognised museum standards in our museums. The advantage of an accreditation scheme is that it formalises recognition that such standards are being applied, but it is not a necessary prerequisite for working towards raising standards. Standards are so important for managing museum collections because they inform strategies, policies, processes and procedures related to collections development, information, access and care. If we accept that Collections Management is a delicate balance between access and preservation, the needs of the current and future generations, and between

³ "Museum Accreditation Program," Museums Australia, accessed 16 October 2012, http://www.mavic.asn.au/museum_accreditation_program

⁴ "Accreditation scheme."

⁵ "Accreditation Benefits," American Alliance of Museums, accessed 16 October 2012, <http://www.aam-us.org/resources/assessment-programs/accreditation/benefits>

economic, social and environmental impacts, it is important that our practices are guided by standards that make it possible for us to achieve this equilibrium.⁶

As I stated in my introduction, I advocate that South African Museums adopt the internationally recognised SPECTRUM standard for museum collections management. SPECTRUM is not, of course, the only museum standard that exists; Australia has its own National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries, which is upheld by the Collections Australia Network,⁷ and the AAM recently published a National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums.⁸ The SPECTRUM standard is currently maintained by the Collections Trust, UK, which has its headquarters in London, England. As such, many UK based museums are familiar with SPECTRUM and adopt the standard as a means of achieving accreditation under The Arts Council of England.

The broad SPECTRUM community:

SPECTRUM's focus is, however, far broader than the United Kingdom. The SPECTRUM standard is presently used by more than 7000 museums in 40 countries, making it a truly international standard.⁹ The museums that implement SPECTRUM are not located only in North America or Europe but extend from Bangladesh to Brazil and from China to New Zealand. As part of an effort to make SPECTRUM more inclusive, the standard, which currently exists in English, French, Dutch and German, is being further translated into Spanish, Chinese and Arabic.¹⁰ What makes SPECTRUM so appealing is precisely the diversity of the community that upholds it. Although Collections Trust UK is the custodian of the standard, all museums that join the SPECTRUM community by adopting it as their chosen standard are encouraged to offer critiques, and to make improvements and suggestions for changes. Various tools, such as the Collections Wiki and annual meetings, facilitate this type of engagement. As such, Nick Poole, CEO of Collections Trust UK, describes SPECTRUM as an ongoing dialogue of accumulated practice, rather than a top down standard.¹¹ Based on the input from museum practitioners across the SPECTRUM community, the standard has now evolved into its fourth version.

⁶ Nick Poole, "International best practices for heritage collections management," (paper presented at the ETHER Initiative International best practices for heritage collections management workshop, Johannesburg, 5 March 2012), accessed 16 October 2012, <http://www.slideshare.net/nickpoole/ether-project-workshop-cape-town>

⁷ "National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries," Collections Australia Network, accessed 16 October 2012, http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/sector_info_item/107

⁸ Elizabeth Merritt, *National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums* (Washington D.C.: The American Association of Museums, 2008)

⁹ "SPECTRUM: Sharing and building best practices in Collections Management," Nick Poole, CEO Collections Trust, accessed 15 October 2012, <http://www.slideshare.net/nickpoole>

¹⁰ Nick Poole, email to author, 2 October 2012.

¹¹ "SPECTRUM: Sharing and building best practices in Collections Management."

SPECTRUM's appeal derives not only from the diversity of experiences and practitioners that develop and contribute towards it, but also from its broad definition of collections as "not just a group of physical objects, books or records. A collection is the total body of material knowledge, narrative, digital assets and other information resources that [an] organisation collects, manages and shares with the public...its value emanates from the cultural, social and intellectual capital that it represents."¹² This understanding seems inclusive of intangible heritage and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), which are increasingly recognised as fundamental elements in South African museum collections and so must be managed with the same level of care and attention as their tangible counterparts. The implication here is that SPECTRUM will offer guidelines for exacting this.

The SPECTRUM procedures:

Moreover, while the SPECTRUM standard document may, at first glance, seem overwhelming, it is constructed in such a way that it can be used piecemeal. Indeed, it is not intended as a document that must be worked through from start to finish. Nor are museums expected to implement every procedure outlined in the document if they do not apply to their situations. Of the 21 procedures that SPECTRUM identifies as collections management activities, only eight are considered primary procedures: Object entry; Loans in; Acquisition; Location/ movement control; Cataloguing; Objects exit; Loans out; and Retrospective documentation. Collectively, these eight primary procedures are the minimum set of processes required in order for a museum to manage its collections. Many museums in South Africa will likely be engaged in these activities already; SPECTRUM serves to formalise these procedures and define the roles of the people who will carry them through.

The first primary procedure, Object entry, deals with new items that are brought into the collection through "the management and documentation of the receipt of objects and associated information which are not currently part of the collections".¹³ If a museum sometimes borrows items for a fixed period of time to include in exhibitions or to photograph, these items are instead managed through the Loans in procedure, which documents the borrowing of these objects for which the museum is responsible during this period.¹⁴

The Acquisition procedure speaks to documenting and managing the addition of new objects and associated information into the permanent museum collection.¹⁵ A Location/

¹² Nick Poole, "International best practices for heritage collections management."

¹³ Alex Dawson and Susanna Hillhouse, eds., *SPECTRUM 4.0* (London: Collections Trust, 2011), 21.

¹⁴ Ibid, 25.

¹⁵ Ibid, 29.

movement control procedure then determines how information concerning the current and past locations of these objects is documented and managed so that the museum can locate the item at any given time.¹⁶ The Cataloguing procedure then considers the compilation and maintenance of key information that formally identifies and describes the item. Such information may include the provenance of objects and details pertaining to acquisition, conservation, exhibition and loan history. Ideally, this procedure will allow all information about the object to be cross referenced, even if it is not stored in a single location.¹⁷

When items leave the museum, these activities will be governed by an Object exit procedure if they are leaving the institution permanently,¹⁸ or by a Loans out procedure if they are being temporarily loaned to another organisation for the purpose of an exhibition, research, conservation, photography or education programme. The Loans out procedure provides guidance on documenting and managing this process.¹⁹

Retrospective documentation is probably the broadest of the primary procedures since it deals with everything that a museum already has in its collections and with trying to improve the standard of information about the items and collections to meet the SPECTRUM Minimum Standards.²⁰

Each of the procedures outlined above must be guided by a written policy. Several accreditation schemes require that museums have written policies. In the UK, for example, The Arts Council of England demands that museums seeking accreditation possess acquisition and disposal policies that include specific details and, since 2011, show evidence of documentation policy, collections care & conservation policy, and collections access policy.²¹

In version 4 of SPECTRUM, all 21 procedures are communicated through flow diagrams that represent the relationship between various people, processes, information and linked procedures. Together these elements make up the procedure. The process column drives the procedure since it represents the various steps necessary to undertake it. The person overseeing the step must make a choice at each stage, which guides them towards the subsequent step until the procedure is complete. An annexure to the main SPECTRUM document provides more detailed information

¹⁶ Ibid, 37.

¹⁷ Ibid, 45.

¹⁸ Ibid, 81.

¹⁹ Ibid, 85.

²⁰ Ibid, 97.

²¹ "Museum Accreditation," Collections Link, accessed 16 October 2012, <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/museum-accreditation>

about the information that must be gathered about items during each stage of the procedure.

Strengthening and developing the museum community:

The user friendly aspect of SPECTRUM certainly contributes to the standard's popularity. Simply implementing these procedures to at least the minimum standard is an easy way of formalising and raising standards in any museum. If many museums across South Africa made the decision to implement SPECTRUM, the effect would be to improve the quality of collections management countrywide. Aside from the obvious benefits that come from enhanced collections care at a national level, such as long-term preservation of South Africa's heritage, there are many possibilities that arise from a developing network of SPECTRUM compliant museums within South Africa. Foremost is a perceived increase in willingness to share and loan items within this network. Loans are a highly effective way of making cultural heritage more accessible to greater numbers of people around South Africa; people in Durban may not be able to travel easily to Kimberley to view a specific collection of artworks but those artworks can be loaned to a Durban based institution for a set period of time and viewed locally by large numbers. Lending items to other institutions in the country is an opportunity to disseminate South Africa's cultural heritage more widely to its citizens.

Museums are often anxious, however, that their items might be damaged or lost while on loan to another institution that may not practice collections management to the same high standards that they do. These concerns, often legitimate, are a barrier to building relationships between institutions. Such issues would not arise when loaning to a museum that has proven it likewise practices collections management at an internationally agreed standard. If a museum is SPECTRUM compliant, it guarantees that all items under its care, both permanently and temporarily, will be managed according to best practices and so this obstacle is overcome.

Implementing high collections management standards could facilitate not only national exchanges but also international loans. At the 2012 Tourism Indaba I had the opportunity to speak with a representative from the US Consulate in Durban. I told her about a project I had recently been involved with where we loaned several Ndebele artworks to a gallery in Canada, which hosted an exhibition on South African and North American beadworks. I said that I hoped it would be a reciprocal exchange and that the complete exhibition might travel to South Africa later in the year. She informed me, in no uncertain terms, that it would not, because overseas institutions did not wish to loan items to South African museums as they were uncertain about the level of care that they would receive. Perhaps I should not have been surprised by this response. It is, after all, the argument cited by many institutions in Europe and North America when challenged

about why they will not repatriate certain items to their countries of origin.²² It is beyond the scope of this paper to debate the legitimacy of such arguments. However, it does seem that implementing an internationally recognised collections management standard in South African museums would go some way towards undermining the validity of such colonial claims. Given the truly international scope of SPECTRUM and its acceptance in 40 countries, it would be difficult for overseas institutions to refuse to loan items to SPECTRUM compliant South African Museums on the grounds that their items may not be managed with sufficient care since SPECTRUM guarantees precisely this internationally agreed standard of care.

Ideally, participation in the SPECTRUM community would naturally facilitate stronger relationships between South African museums and international institutions that adhere to or recognise the SPECTRUM standard. Subsequently we might see an increased number of loans *to* South Africa, rather than *from* South Africa as is currently the case. And while loans are no substitute for repatriation, these relationships might, at least, culminate in South Africans enjoying the opportunity to engage, albeit for a short time, with aspects of their cultural heritage that have previously been held overseas.

Reciprocal knowledge sharing:

Engagement with an international SPECTRUM community might elicit even greater benefits than tangible loans. Perhaps the most significant of these is the possibility for knowledge sharing. Given that SPECTRUM is an ongoing dialogue, there are opportunities for South African museums to participate in this and both learn from and contribute to it. As stated, SPECTRUM offers a comprehensive definition of collections, which encompasses tangible and intangible heritage items. However, the standard does not, currently, deal as extensively with intangible collections as it does with tangible. This seems to be an area in which South African museum practitioners can contribute very positively, based on their significant and extensive experience managing oral history collections, IKS, and other intangible heritage. South Africa also has experience managing specific tangible collections, such as collections of rock art paintings. Contributions of this type of knowledge would not only enrich the SPECTRUM standard but might further raise the profile of intangible heritage worldwide through this medium.

Professionalisation of the sector:

Participation in this wider knowledge sharing community should provide practitioners and institutions with a perceived sense of professional development, which is important

²² For more discussion around museums and repatriation see, for example: Bettina Messias Carbonell, *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

in terms of attracting competent people to the sector. Moreover, if implementation of SPECTRUM is widespread across museum in South Africa, knowledge of the standard equips staff with transferrable skills, which is an important part of personal development. If an accreditation scheme does develop that formally recognises these standards and the work undertaken by practitioners to reach them, this further increased a sense of progression.

Should South African museums agree on a standard for the country's museums, this also opens opportunities for conversation with higher education institutions that offer courses in museum studies. Encouraging these institutions to include the SPECTRUM standard as part of the curriculum means young professionals entering the sector will already be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to progress and contribute meaningfully to museums. It is one way in which a work in a museum can evolve from a job into a career.

Conclusions:

In the long-term, developing a South African museum accreditation scheme would bring many advantages in terms of greater accountability, developing stronger relationships between institutions, raising the profile of museums, and professionalising the sector. More immediately, introducing agreed standards for how we manage our collections, which are core to our work, would bring great benefits not only in raising the level at which we care for our collections and how we balance this against the access needs of both the current and future generations, but also in strengthening partnerships and knowledge sharing with museums in South Africa and overseas. SPECTRUM is not the only museum standard capable of facilitating these benefits but its established reputation and broad international focus certainly make it appealing in a South African context.

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