Who values conservation education?

A review of the discussions at Icon's Education Roundtable Debate

February 2020

THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION

About Icon

Icon raises awareness of the cultural, social and economic value of caring for heritage and champions high standards of conservation.

We are an independent charity and membership organisation representing nearly 3,000 individuals and organisations, including professional conservators, volunteers and owners of cultural heritage.

We are the professional body for the conservation profession, working to raise the standards of conservation practice though developing and maintaining professional standards, which underpin the accreditation of professional conservators across the UK, and further afield.

Conservation Higher Education Institution Network

Icon supports 16 groups and four professional networks. These are member-led groups who come together to address specific issues, which may be subject-specialisms (e.g. textiles) or broader cross-disciplinary issues. Icon's Conservation Higher Education Institutions Network (CHEIN) was formed in 2019, bringing together conservation educators, conservation students, professional conservators and colleagues from related disciplines who may be interested in conservation education/training.

The objectives of the Conservation Higher Education Institutions Network are:

- To create a platform to share ideas on conservation education.
- To enable members to discuss current challenges for conservation education and plan strategies.
- To provide members a platform from which to discuss the needs of conservation education with practitioners.
- To keep education in sync with the developments of the profession in different contexts.
- To contribute to any of Icon's strategy work that impacts education and training strategy work.

Further information about the Network can be found on the Icon website.

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Introduction

The Icon Education Roundtable event took place on 22nd January 2020, bringing together stakeholders from across the conservation profession: employers, education providers, funders and representatives from heritage bodies across the UK. They were joined by individuals from across the globe who followed and contributed to the debate on Twitter (#IconRT) during and after the event.

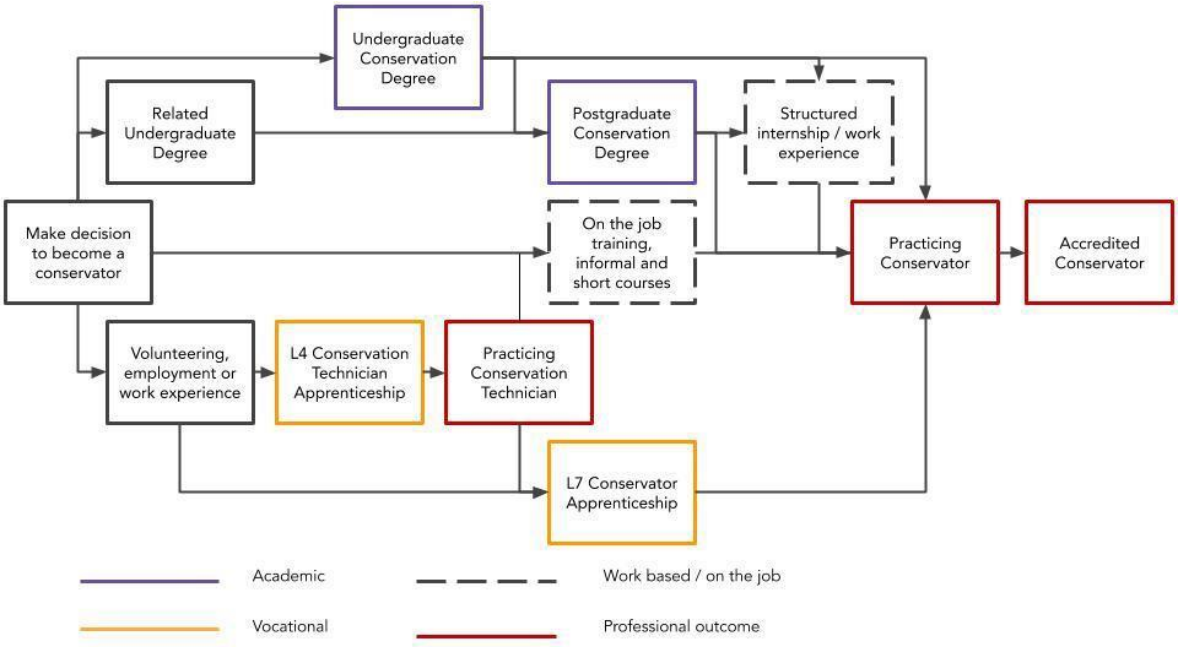
The themes for the structured discussions were drawn from a survey of Icon members which took place in October 2019.[1]

This report summarises the key points raised during the debate and identifies a broad range of ideas and measures that are needed to support the continuing development of conservation education in the UK.

This report is not an end in itself, but a means of capturing current thinking and exploring the partnerships that will be needed to build a resilient and ambitious training environment for the next generation of conservation professionals.

How is the education sector made up?

People enter the conservation workforce through many different routes, which vary based on their educational background, stage of career, sector-specific factors or their own preferred way of learning.



The formal academic route is by far the most well developed, being delivered by 11 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) through 29 programmes covering object focussed, material

[1] See Conservation Education Survey, October 2019.

specific and broader collections management training. Most conservation professionals generally follow this route into the profession.

The vocational route has historically been less formal, and largely based on non-graduate traineeships and informal apprenticeship programmes. These are sometimes, but not always, aimed at people working towards conservation technician roles, which can be supported by qualifications such as the Icon / V&A Conservation and Collections Care Technicians Diploma (CCCTD). There are also qualifications such as the Archives & Records Association (ARA) Certificate in Archives Conservation, which specifically supports conservators training in the archive conservation sector.

Apprenticeships in conservation have also been developed which offer a blended approach of both study and work-based experience. The 'Cultural Heritage Conservator' apprenticeship standard is delivered at Level 7 and requires that the apprentice complete a master's degree in conservation in order to be completed. The Level 4 'Cultural Heritage Conservation Technician' standard, will have a separate taught element delivered by a recognised education provider.

Both apprenticeships require a formal 'end point assessment' before they can be formally signed-off; Icon will be undertaking that role. These apprenticeships were both approved by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education in 2019, and it is likely that delivery will commence in late 2020 or early 2021.

Beyond the formal offer targeting new entrants into the profession, there are a large number of workshops, conferences and seminars supporting conservators in their continuing professional development throughout their careers. These events are often delivered through specialist groups and networks across the UK including Icon's own groups and networks.

This is a significant educational offer, given the size of the conservation profession[2] in the UK.

Why do we need this discussion now?

Events such as the closure and subsequent move of the Textile Conservation Centre from the University of Southampton to the University of Glasgow (2011), the closure of the furniture conservation programme at Bucks New University (2014), and the recent closure of the paper conservation programmes at UAL: Camberwell (2019) have raised concerns as to the resilience of this vital sector, training future generations of conservators, and how they can continue to effectively support the needs of the UK market, whilst maintaining their high professional standards.

Conservation faces many of the same challenges as other parts of the education system, such as pressures on student recruitment, a drive for profitability of programmes and a reliance on the recruitment of full fee-paying international students.

[2] Icon's Labour Market Intelligence report of 2012 identified that there were 5,125 people working in the conservation profession in 2013. An updated survey is currently being undertaken with results due later this year.

These issues are compounded when considering the particular nature of conservation training, which generally requires large teaching and workshop spaces for relatively small numbers of students and is therefore relatively costly to deliver – particularly compared to completely lecture based programmes.

Within the conservation profession we all recognise the vital importance of conservation education but there is still work to do in order to increase the understanding of the value of conservation amongst policymakers and the general public. We therefore note that the debate surrounding the ongoing maintenance of conservation needs to address the question of who values conservation education, but more broadly who values conservation as a discipline.

Bringing together these themes, the Icon Education Roundtable Event, was developed in partnership with Icon's Conservation Higher Education Institutions Network to explore the concerns of the profession and to help identify where efforts to increase resilience should be focussed, and who should be involved in leading and shaping those debates.

Overview of the debate

Throughout the day, the discussions explored different aspects of conservation training, from the specific skills being taught and the differing models of training, through to the need for advocacy for conservation education and the profession more broadly. Below we have given an overview of the key points raised through the day.

What skills do conservators need?

The role of professional conservators has been steadily evolving over recent years. Increasing numbers of roles require conservators to adopt more outward looking positions which draw in elements of outreach, project management and communication with non-specialists amongst other skills alongside their in-depth understanding of conservation theory and practice.

For example, at the British Library, some conservators are employed to undertake technically complex treatments in specialist areas – such as manuscripts, whilst others, still working as interventive conservators, but across a broader range of material types, focus on specific aspects of practical conservation such as minor repairs. In addition, some teams focus on preventive conservation, and on emerging areas of conservation practice such as digitisation.

So, what does this mean for HEIs in the UK who are training the future generation of conservators? It would seem to suggest that the expectation of what HEIs deliver is increasingly broad, going beyond practical conservation training. But given the sheer breadth of skills required, it would be an almost impossible task for HEIs to produce 'oven ready' conservators, and whether they should even be expected to do so remains open for debate.

> "What skills are needed? Practical skills certainly, but also agility and an openness to make the most of development opportunities"

Adding to this, there is rarely now a clear career path post-graduation, with many graduates uncertain about what kinds of positions they will be able to secure. In this situation, it is essential that conservators are adaptable if they are to make the most of opportunities as they arise – they still of course need a core skill set and in-depth understanding of conservation, but on top of this they need a clear understanding of their own professional development needs, to know how to learn, how to fill their skills gaps, where to gain experience and how to adapt.

As part of the ongoing evolution of the conservation profession, there are and will continue to be emerging areas of practice requiring an understanding of different types of conservation skills - for example in digitisation, working with modern materials and time-based media. However, greater research into future areas of practice is essential to understand the full range and scale of the skills needs across the conservation profession before programmes are adapted or new programmes are developed. Icon's Labour Market Intelligence research, due to be completed in early 2020, will help give a fuller picture of the distribution and need for specific conservation skills across the UK.

In addition to workforce analysis gained through updated labour market intelligence data, it is recognised that there needs to be closer collaboration across the sector, particularly between employers and HEIs, but also across the education sector more generally.

This will help ensure that courses remain fit for purpose, and that employers have a greater understanding of what can practically be delivered given the constraints of the HE system in which conservation education operates. It is expected that the recently formed Icon Conservation Higher Education Institutions Network will be able to support this agenda, but there may be the need to facilitate the development of other networks or groups to ensure the dialogue remains open and that actions can be delivered by those best placed to achieve positive results .

So, can HEI's adapt their programmes, and should they? It is vital that conservation training continues to adapt and evolve to ensure that conservators are being trained with the skills that they need to be successful in the job market post-graduation. However, change takes time, particularly in large institutions such as universities, who must undertake a process of development before seeking approval and validating programmes. As such, it is essential any proposed changes are grounded in reliable evidence and address the future needs of the sector. Indeed, it may well be the case that some of the training options might not sit in the HEI sector, but may rest in other more general programmes, or may even need a broader look at the delivery models needed for conservation training.

Do we have the right models of training?

As well as ensuring that the right skills are taught, conservation must be delivered in a way which meets the needs of those who are embarking on their careers in conservation, and ensuring that as far as possible, all people who want to become conservators can do so in a way which best fits their own learning needs. This means formal education for those becoming conservators, but also it means enabling professionals to develop throughout their careers. This offer does this effectively, but that doesn't mean that there aren't plenty of opportunities to review and build on those models.

Many programmes are master's qualifications, with some undergraduate provision in place. There are also Trailblazer apprenticeships which have been developed, including the level 4 Cultural Heritage Conservation Technician, however the programmes themselves aren't due to start until later in 2020 or early 2021.

> "Do we have the right mix of training? Yes, we probably do, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't look at it again"

The important factor when considering the levels of training, is how closely does that link to the levels of knowledge and understanding that the role requires - the majority of training is at level 7 (master's level), but does this mean that professionals need to have a master's degree to practice, and by extension has conservation become a 'level 7 profession'?[3]

This requires further consideration, particularly given that there is widespread recognition in the UK, that conservators may enter the profession through vocational as well as academic routes.

This was one of the main drivers for both the introduction of professional accreditation for conservators in 1999, as well as Icon's withdrawal from The European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers (ECCO) in 2007.

Amongst employers there is a divide in whether they require a master's over another qualification. Often, but not always cases where a master's is required is if it is linked to roles where specialist training exists, but it is also used as a way of helping the shortlisting process.

Complicating the matter further is a need to ensure that conservators are valued on a par with other allied professionals. This is important particularly in an institutional context, where rigid HR processes and role grading systems link salaries to expected minimum levels of experience and qualifications as well as the specific demands of the role. While it is possible to level criticism at the approach taken by some HR departments the reality of the present situation cannot be ignored.[4]

Discussions need to continue in this area and further research coming out of Icon's LMI project may well be useful in supporting this process. Another aspect which could be drawn into this debate is whether it is the time to reconsider the potential benefits in accreditation (by Icon) of conservation courses.

Amongst some of those attending the round table there was a suggestion for work to be done to investigate the feasibility of developing a greater range of undergraduate training opportunities. For some, a shift towards the development of bachelor's degrees over three years would allow more opportunity to develop both practical skills and underpinning knowledge. However, a differentiated offer is still needed to ensure that those who are career changers - including those coming to the profession at a later stage in life, or those who may have trained in other areas such as engineering - can become conservators.

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[3] See appendix for an explanation of qualification levels.

[4] The campaigning work of Fair Museum Jobs is interesting in this context; they draw attention to poor recruitment practices and lobby for change.

Looking beyond formal training, it's clear that post-graduate work-based training is invaluable in supporting recent graduates to consolidate knowledge and help gain a greater understanding of the broader work-related skills required in the job market. These opportunities should be expanded through access to funding from trusts and foundations as well as endowments for fellowships.

No conservator stops learning after their formative education; all professionals need to focus on their continuing professional development to reflect not only changing practice but also the development of their own careers. It was felt that the education system (not just universities) needs to be able to effectively support this.

Recent developments, such as the two new Trailblazer Apprenticeships in England which have been approved by the Government, are seen as positive. Work now needs to be undertaken to ensure that employers have a clear understanding of how they will work in practice. As well as offering a blend of vocational and academic learning, apprenticeships do not cost anything for the apprentice themselves. This helps to overcome the burden of cost, which is recognised as one of the key barriers for many who wish to enter the conservation profession.

The range of delivery models, and their impact on the profile of candidates, is one of the key issues for the sector as a whole, particularly with respect to diversity which is often raised as a serious issue for the sector and something that needs to be tackled across a range of fronts . However, it isn't always clear what practitioners mean by diversity, whether it is referring to encouraging greater participation from black and minority ethnic groups (BME), those with a disability[5], or other aspects that may link to a protected characteristic.

Before this can be considered, there needs to be agreement as to the key priorities regarding broadening diversity, as the strategy taken will vary greatly depending on the audience being targeted. Diversity in general is a much broader issue, and the education sector cannot be expected to solely provide a solution. Tackling the issue requires a concerted effort across all aspects of training and recruitment practices, as well as outreach and engagement.

How do we advocate for conservation education?

What does success look like? Ultimately successful advocacy for conservation education means ensuring a stronger voice, greater visibility and wider understanding of the profession. This will result in greater recognition by the Government, policymakers and the public and a greater appreciation of the high value and importance of conservation. This strengthened position will then create an environment in which conservation education can thrive.

Advocacy is a significant area of focus for the profession, as such topics which were identified though the debate, form just a part of the wider work which is being put into advocating for the conservation profession.

> "Do we need a new 'big idea' to drive forward advocacy for conservation training?"

[5] Both are thought to sit at between 4% and 5%, compared to 12% and 20% amongst the population according to Arts Council's 4th annual diversity report published in 2019.

It is recognised that a much stronger case can be put forward to support conservation education, if it is included as part of wider efforts to advocate for the conservation profession as a whole. For example, demonstrating the vital importance of ensuring that there is a well-trained and knowledgeable workforce which is working at the heart of preserving the nation's collective cultural heritage, for posterity, enjoyment, research and to support the UK's soft power agenda.

When undertaking advocacy with stakeholders and policy makers, it is essential that the arguments are presented in ways which are generally accepted and understood, such as making the economic case, and talking to them in ways which are inclusive.

The economic case is a good example of where if one were to solely focus on the cost of conservation education on its own, it could be seen simply as being very expensive to deliver. However, it would be much stronger to present the case as part of establishing the economic impact of conservation, both in terms of maintaining the value of collections, as well as the associated economic impact in areas such as tourism.

Considering the ways in which we talk about conservation is also important. As a profession, we often talk about how we are unique, and that is indisputable – conservation is a multidisciplinary profession, drawing together technical practical skills alongside a deep understanding of materials, and scientific knowledge. However, it is not uniquely unique, we must be careful of the language we use to avoid 'othering' those who we are advocating to.

Through their individual efforts, professional conservators and institutions are outstanding advocates for the profession, undertaking outreach and engaging members of the public and stakeholders in their work. There are also several television programmes which regularly have weekly viewing figures in the millions - these programmes often do involve professional conservators. Whilst there may be legitimate concerns about how these programmes portray the profession, that doesn't mean the profession shouldn't engage with them, given their significant public reach.

Before anything else happens, we should first identify and review the evidence which already exists, for example previous LMI research, wider sector reviews and the impact case studies which are already prepared by individual HEIs. This evidence should be collated and shared in one central place, such as on the Icon website.

By doing this, it will also be possible to identify whether there is a need for further research to help advocate for conservation education. One suggestion that was identified, was whether there should be an academic study, led by one or more of the HEIs who are delivering conservation education into the economic impact of the profession.

Advocacy clearly must evolve and adapt in response to the pressures of the time. It is also understood that promoting the value of conservation education doesn't only sit with the conservation profession and the sector needs to continue to work collaboratively with all stakeholders, including those in the wider heritage sector to continue to push and promote the value of conservation as part of the preservation of our shared heritage more broadly, and by doing so ensure we strengthen our voice and increase our impact.

What next?

Through a wide-ranging debate, it was inevitably only possible to scratch the surface of such an important yet complex and broad-ranging topic. Given this, whilst there were several clear actions, many important aspects require further considered thought before a course of action can be identified.

In driving forward these important discussions, Icon is committed to taking a leading role in supporting and advocating for conservation education and will ensure it has oversight of the debate to ensure that the focus and momentum which has been built around this debate is not lost.

The actions identified through the discussions are outlined below:

1. Sharing outcomes of the debate and relevant research with the sector.

   Ensuring this report is widely disseminated to the membership and wider stakeholders and offering individuals the opportunity to take part and contribute in future discussions.
   (Icon to lead)

   Icon will share the outcomes of its LMI research, to ensure that it can be effectively used to shape programmes and identify areas for future work.
   (Icon to lead)

2. Undertaking an audit of current research

   Icon will collate existing research into a central resource on its website. This will include HEI impact case studies, Icon's latest LMI research and other previous research which has been undertaken relevant to conservation education.
   (Icon to lead with input from HEI network and other stakeholder groups such as Heritage2020)

3. Building on existing networks

   The Icon Conservation Higher Education Institutions Network will open its membership to employers, enabling greater collaboration between employers and training providers.
   (CHEIN to lead)

4. Ensuring education forms part of Icon's advocacy work

   Icon will ensure that where appropriate, that advocacy for conservation education forms part of its wider work around advocating for the conservation profession.
   (Icon to lead)

However, beyond those highlighted above, what was clear is that it would be premature to make more wide ranging and fundamental recommendations - particularly those to change courses – until the existing research has been completed and collated.

Once this has happened it will then be possible to identify whether there are specific recommendations that can be made, or areas identified for further research required. This might include several areas discussed during the roundtable, including whether there is a need for HEI led research into the value of conservation education to support advocacy for the sector as well as in assessing whether there is a need to encourage the development of differing models of postgraduate training opportunities such as in internships.

There are also significant areas which do not solely relate to conservation education itself but will have a large impact on how the debate is taken forward. For example, diversity is recognised as an issue across the heritage sector, but it is particularly important for the education sector, given its position in attracting and supporting new entrants into the profession.

Another such area is the discussion around the 'level' of the conservation profession, its perceived parity with other professions and the impact that has on salaries is a continued topic that the profession as a whole will continue to debate and must form part of ongoing discussions. There may be the opportunity to reopen the discussions as to whether Icon should accredit conservation courses, however before this can be considered it needs the full buy-in from the HEI sector.

So, where does this leave us? What is clear is that there is a huge amount of esteem and value placed on conservation education, and its importance in providing a pipeline of potential entrants into the sector. As a sector, we must continue to ensure channels of communication are open to enable us to all work collaboratively to support an educational offer which meets the needs of the profession now and into the future.

Appendix: Qualification levels

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Level - England, Wales & Northern Ireland</th><th rowspan="2">Level - Scotland</th><th rowspan="2">Example Qualifications</th><th colspan="2">Meaning of the levels</th></tr>
<tr><th>England, Wales & Northern Ireland</th><th>Scotland</th></tr>
<tr><td>8</td><td>12</td><td>PhD, DPhil</td><td colspan="2">Original understanding. Context lacks definition, extends a field of knowledge, critically evaluate, advanced specialist skills. Context lacks definition and where there may be.</td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td><td>11</td><td>MA, MSc, PgDip, PgCert</td><td colspan="2">Reformulates knowledge and understanding. Critically analyses, understands wider context and theory. Uses skills to conceptualise and address problematic situations that involve many interacting factors. Design and evaluate.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">6</td><td>10</td><td>BA (Hons), BSc (Hons), GradDip, GradCert</td><td rowspan="2">Advanced knowledge and understanding. Understands perspectives and approaches, critically analyse, interpret and evaluate complex information. Determine, refine, adapt methods, design research.</td><td>Understanding of principles and practices, can critically analyse these. Identify, analyse and define solutions to complex problems.</td></tr>
<tr><td>9</td><td>BA, BSC, GradDip, Grad Cert</td><td>Understanding of most principles and practices and can critically analyse these. Identify, analyse and define solutions to problems.</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>8</td><td>HND, DipHE</td><td colspan="2">Has knowledge and understanding in broadly defined complex contexts. Analyse information. Determine, adapt and use appropriate methods. Use research to inform actions.</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>7</td><td>Foundation Degree, CertHE, Level 4 Apprenticeship, Advances Higher</td><td colspan="2">Has knowledge and understanding. Can analyse, interpret and evaluate information. Aware of the nature of the field of work. Able to identify, adapt and use skills to inform actions. Review appropriateness of methods and approach.</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>6</td><td>A Level, Level 3 Apprenticeship, Higher</td><td colspan="2">Factual knowledge and understanding. Interpret relevant information and ideas. Able to identify and select methods and use appropriate investigative actions.</td></tr>
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