

The Apprenticeship Debate

22nd March 2018

Post Event Report

Overview

The 'Apprenticeship Debate' was held at the British Library on 22nd March 2018 and drew together nearly 50 conservation professionals to discuss the key challenges and questions surrounding the development of Trailblazer Apprenticeships for the Conservation Profession. More than 2,000 were also able to access online through Facebook Live! Through the event participants engaged in a wide-ranging debate around the following key topics:

- Should we be supporting apprenticeships for conservation?
- How do we ensure parity between those training via an apprenticeship route and those who have come through the academic pathway?
- To what extent will apprenticeships help to address skills shortages in the sector?
- How straight forward is it going to be to deliver apprenticeships in your workplace?

Below we have outlined a summary of the key areas of the discussion.

A cultural shift for the profession?

The conservation sector has a long history of supporting academic as well as vocational routes into the profession, albeit with a large focus on academic routes in recent years. Apprenticeships as defined by the current Government scheme has offered the opportunity to help formalise the various vocational routes and for the sector, access Government funding to support training and to critically consider what knowledge, skills and behaviours it is expected that a Conservator and a Conservation Technician should be able to demonstrate. They are always however likely to be one amongst a range of options which are available to support people in becoming Conservation Technicians and Conservators.

Does the delivery of Apprenticeships in practice require a cultural shift from the profession which has largely become accustomed to taking on staff who already have formal conservation training? The answer is possibly 'yes' and 'no'. Certainly, bringing in apprentices into established workplaces will present challenges, such as identifying the type of work they can undertake at the beginning, the time required to train and support apprentices in house, and the technicalities of assigning salary levels to these types of positions. However, for many larger organisations much of this groundwork may well have already been completed for other parts of the organisations and training providers will be on hand to help employers ensure that they have everything lined up before they agree to take on candidates. In the Private sector, it is recognised that the profile of candidates they often take on is very different, and whilst they might not have the formal structures in place, many do have

experience of taking on staff and trainees with more basic levels of skills and training them in house to ensure that they are able to perform a particular job role.

It is recognised that for those employers who are paying the apprenticeship levy and those in the public sector in particular (who have a target of 2.3% of their workforce to be engaged in apprenticeships) may feel that apprenticeships are being imposed on them, and to some extent they may feel that they are having to make it work for them. This may seem negative, however what it has done is to help drive engagement in their development to ensure that what is being developed is fit for purpose for the sector. It is also important to highlight that the sector has largely been supportive of the developments, not only in order to meet these targets, but also the wider benefits of helping to broaden the access to the profession.

A solution for skills gaps?

The last Conservation Focused Labour Market Information was based on Icon's Labour Market Intelligence survey of 2012; however, Conservation has also been included in recent research by the Arts Council (2016), There are various views as to what skills needs are, this has previously been seen as relating to areas such as textiles conservation. Anecdotally it is recognised that over the past few years, other areas are emerging as areas for the development of technical skills, including 20th Century Objects / Modern Materials, Photographic Materials and in Conservation Management. More broadly there has also been a debate rumbling about the need for conservators to be able to develop leadership and management, bid writing and more generic business skills.

Tackling the practical conservation skills on one level it is immediately possible for existing master's programmes to be linked to apprenticeships, particularly for the master's level Conservator Standards, however, only where the delivery takes place in England (skills and training is a devolved matter- similar, but distinct systems operate in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). This may potentially limit the offer, however, given the scales of economy in delivering new training offers, it might be realistic that the numbers coming through may be too low in niche areas to make delivery viable for training courses anyway.

What the developments of apprenticeships has done has been to help to continue to raise the voice of employers in critically assessing what their skills needs are. If there were dozens of starts each year on apprenticeships from particular employers what it would mean is that employers would be able to work with training providers to develop bespoke training packages which meet their particular training needs. It is more likely that in the short term at least, that starts will be in the tens per year, as such it may be more appropriate for those training providers (who are interested in being involved) to develop 'off the peg' packages which employers can then select when they take on apprentices. For the Conservator apprenticeship, this will mean the repackaging of existing tried and tested degree programmes, packaged in a way which can be delivered on a part time basis for the duration of the apprenticeship.

Looking at those wider work-related skills for mid-career and senior professionals, it is unlikely that a Conservation Apprenticeship will be the appropriate training route, however, other more generic programmes are on offer such as the 'Senior Leadership and Management' apprenticeships that existing employees could undertake as part of their professional development . Alternatively, it might

also be the case that shorter courses and development opportunities are more appropriate to address these skills.

This may not necessarily be an issue. Those embarking on apprenticeships are likely to be at an earlier stage of their career in any case. Therefore, if apprenticeships are developed and aligned to more general programmes which provide the underpinning a foundation in the principles and core skills of conservation, then those completing apprenticeships will have exactly the same opportunity to specialise as any graduate from any existing UK programme.

Furthermore, the skills highlighted represent what it is that the sector needs now, but it may well be the case that the skills needed in the future (when the first apprentices are likely to be completing) may well be different, further strengthening the case to link apprenticeships to more general existing programmes, or well established, but still relatively broad specialist areas.

Opportunities for diversity and equality of access

Apprenticeships offer the potential to open access to the profession to a broader range of individuals, through both the opportunity to study and earn a wage at the same time, as well as the focus on vocational skills (whilst still including the necessary academic rigor for the degree apprenticeships). In fact, the combination of academic delivery and time spend in the workplace developing vocational skills, it is likely that these may well be seen as being the 'gold standard' for conservation training. If increasing diversity is truly an important issue for employers in the sector, then they will have to be mindful of this in recruiting for vacancies to ensure that as well as getting the best candidate for the position, that they are able to consider what?.

The opportunity for broadening access will also in part be defined by the entry requirements set by employers and training providers. One of the key factors relates to the fact that the Conservator Apprenticeship in particular has been pitched as a master's Degree Apprenticeship, meaning that candidates will have to complete a master's Degree in Conservation as part of the apprenticeship. It would be remiss of the training providers if they did not ensure that candidates who were selected had not been suitably assessed as being able to achieve the degree. In the most cases this would usually be an undergraduate degree in a relevant subject, although some may be able to offer exceptions for cases where candidates are able to demonstrate that they have developed sufficient experience through work or other training.

The other argument would be to say that the apprenticeship level should be downgraded. However, that in itself would risk creating a two-tier system, where those who have completed the apprenticeship would then not be able to effectively compete with candidates who have come through the usual academic route.

Can the profession respond to these developments?

The development of the Trailblazer Apprenticeships has stemmed from a government drive to revamp vocational education across England. One of the main factors in this has been to increase employer involvement in the development of skills and training programmes across all the professional sectors .

In terms of developing the Conservation Technician and Conservator standards themselves this has undoubtedly been a success. Employers from across the sector have been developing the content of these standards, and dozens more contributing through the consultation to ensure that standards developed are fit for purpose and outline the skills that they recognise as being needed by both of these job roles .

Then looking at the training offer, it is limited as we know already, a factor of the high cost of delivery and the comparative size of the workforce as a whole. Apprenticeships offer the opportunity to help support those programmes via Government funding, one of the few areas of skills where the Government are actively investing. Most practically, it is expected that individual employers would be taking on ones and twos on an ad hoc basis. Given this, it is most likely that apprentices will need to be signed on existing training programmes. This is certainly a benefit, offering the opportunity to help ensure that training providers remain financially viable.

In doing this however, delivery models will need to be adaptable, to ensure that a coherent programme of study can be developed for what will effectively be part time delivery. As apprentices are first and foremost employees, time out to attend courses will need to be clearly planned and agreed in advance. This will also help the employers effectively plan their own internal training and work programme for the apprenticeships to mean that they are able to effectively perform the roles required of them.

The government drive for increased employer involvement in shaping delivery is likely to have mixed results in the sector. The profession is small, and it is well known that the training options are limited. Training providers are therefore having to develop conservators with skills which can make them adaptable for many areas of the profession, whilst employers are increasingly having their own bespoke needs which need to be met. But with the scale of the sector, are there the scales of economy to make this approach viable. Trailblazer apprenticeships at their heart have been instigated to help ensure that training providers are teaching the skills that employers want. But when employers are likely to be talking about ones and twos- the scale is unlikely going to be there for the courses to be truly adaptable. 'off the peg' solutions do need to be developed, and HEIs are quite within their rights to focus on what they can deliver best.

Getting ready to deliver and a call for action

In terms of their development, both standards are working to slightly different timescales, it is expected that the Conservation Technician Apprenticeships will be ready for delivery by September 2018, and the Conservator Apprenticeships, whilst likely to be ready, will start in 2019. There are still questions to ask about how to make apprenticeships work in practice.

- From the perspective of employers potentially taking on apprentices ensuring the logistics are lined up is the key priority, this could even mean exploring models where apprentices are shared across different organisations which would offer the opportunity to both enhance the offer to apprentices and share the training load for staff members.
- There is now the need for training providers to work out what it is that they are able to deliver, and what their fundamental requirements are to ensure that candidates are able to be successful in their apprenticeships.