

Icon Education Roundtable Debate

Who values conservation education?

Summary of Icon Member Survey, October 2019

Overview

The Education Roundtable event, 'Who values conservation education?' was been developed in response to the concerns of many within the conservation profession as to the resilience, or lack of resilience, of conservation education and training in the UK.

In October 2019, Icon members in were sent a survey, asking them to share their views of the current state of conservation education in the UK - 85 members responded to the survey. The key areas arising through the survey were then used to help shape the programme for the Roundtable debate.

Below we have picked out messages which addressed the top themes raised under each question asked to help facilitate the wider debate.

NB: By including the responses, we are making no comment as to their relative values, rather presenting them as a summary of the views of the survey respondents.

What are the current issues facing conservation education?

The most common issues raised through this question included the feeling that universities were under increasing financial pressure, which was putting courses under pressure which was seen as challenging given the high space demands and relatively low student numbers entering conservation programmes.

Furthermore, the high cost of tuition fees and low salary levels relative to the cost of training limited the number of potential candidates.

A significant number of participants felt that the practical skills of conservation graduates wasn't at a suitable high level when they started in the job market.

Response	% Response
Universities are under financial pressures	26%
Courses teach limited practical skills	19%
High cost of tuition fees	12%
There is an oversupply of graduates relative to the job market	11%
Courses have high space requirements and staff: student rations	9%
There are a limited number of courses made worse through closures	9%
Need to advocate to employers, managers and the wider sector	8%
Diversity is limited in the sector	8%
Limited jobs, low salary levels and limited job security prevent recruitment	8%
The sector as a whole is too academic / master's focussed	6%
Course content is representative of job market	5%
Courses should include more content related to 'Conservation Science'	2%

Courses need to ensure that they can maintain a range of specialist content	2%
Limited careers advice / school links promoting the profession	2%
Unpaid internships should be stopped	2%
Delays in setting up Apprenticeships	1%
Hard to justify Apprenticeships	1%
Need to establish Apprenticeships	1%
More cross departmental working needed within courses	1%
The practical skills issue is misleading	1%
Courses should include more content related to 'Restoration'	1%
Courses should teach a broader range of work-related skills	1%
Brexit poses risk to funding and research opportunities	1%
Maintain Quality of Programmes	1%
The number of post graduate training opportunities are limited	1%
There is an undersupply of conservators coming out of courses	1%

Below we have picked out several specific responses which highlight the range of comments raised through the survey.

- Keeping up to date; pressure on space with conservation courses requiring access to both lecture and studio space; providing enough training in areas where there is a need for more conservators, such as photographic conservation; increasing fees/ living costs for students; potential loss/ large drop in numbers of overseas students, impact already being seen in some universities; loss of access to EU funds/ grants etc for research. Increasingly there is also the real difficulty of conservation salaries, for other than those in high level managerial posts, or some large organisations not having changed for really in effect 20 years. This must be a consideration for some going into the profession and needs to be continually pushed back.
- From my perspective as a recent graduate, I think a potential large issue currently facing conservation education is the cost of course to the university vs the value that the university places on these courses. As I feel that conservation courses are most likely expensive to run, require large amounts of space and costly resource e.g. equipment, materials (their cost and relevant licenses), art works and the associated insurance cost, coupled with the fact that you cannot take large number of students to offset these costs, as the tutor student ratio needs to be kept low. Furthermore, master's fees for conservation courses, whilst they may actually be reasonable when they are compared against all of these outgoings they are extremely expensive and quite prohibitive, especially when they are typically longer than a year, the extra cost of living is a significant factor.
- The main issues are not just affecting conservation but all higher education courses in the field of arts and crafts. Firstly, educational institutions are run as businesses that need to be economically viable. Conservation courses can be very expensive to run (small number of students due to space requirements, specialist teaching, etc). Also, the high fees that students are paying affect the way they view education, they take a consumer attitude and demand spoon-feeding from tutors which limits their learning experience and affects the level of emerging conservators.
- Courses are being axed e.g. Camberwell with no immediate replacement/succession management in place, as with this course closing one generation has missed out on the opportunity; assumption is give more to vocational training e.g. apprenticeship, but that is not the answer as institutions and private practice cannot cover all that is required to enable someone to qualify wholly as a

conservator; they also don't have enough money to do this; and whilst MAs programmes are in place for conservation it is hard to justify the push towards apprenticeship type schemes.

- Lack of graduate jobs Lack of understanding from the governing body. Lack of quality understanding of the transition between a degree and work. There are not many jobs in the museum sector because of poor funding from the current government. Therefore, private companies should be trying to better assist. Apprenticeship schemes similar to Germany would be a much more viable method of training Conservators.
- Accessibility for students of economic status, encouraging education for a diverse student body (BAME, disabled, LGBTQ+), providing support for students who are neuro-divergent and also those who struggle with mental health, all of this within an economic environment that constantly tries to compress resources afforded instructors and courses who try to address the needs of conservation on a short time span

What needs to happen to support conservation education?

Three issues clearly emerged from the survey, in particular the need for greater levels of funding to support conservation education. It was felt that this should either come from the cross funding the programmes from other more profitable courses as well as access to greater levels of funding generally. In support of this respondents felt that this should be supported by a strong and coherent advocacy case to help set out the value of the profession as a whole and thus the need to support training.

Furthermore, respondents highlighted the need to support a greater number of post graduate training opportunities, particularly paid structured internship programmes which would allow graduates to effectively develop their practical skills post training.

Response	% Response
Greater levels of funding needed to support programmes	21%
Need to Advocate for the sector.	18%
Need to established more post graduate training opportunities	13%
Advocacy efforts should target university management and the Government	8%
Greater level of school engagement	5%
Apprenticeships represent a positive development for the sector	5%
Courses require greater employer links	5%
Advocacy efforts should target employers	4%
Courses should seek to address practical skills vs academic debate	4%
Need for a greater range of courses	4%
Icon and relevant networks should have greater involvement	4%
Courses should be 'future proofed'	2%
More data needed to support Advocacy	1%
Reinstate the Camberwell programme	1%
Courses should be more flexible	1%
Need to consider the oversupply of graduates when considering the issues	1%
Need to review the general curriculum to ensure it is relevant	1%
Courses - Science needed	1%
Provide a clearer career path for potential students	1%
Need to address low salary levels in the sector	1%
A greater number of professional qualifications is required	1%

Below we have picked out several specific responses which highlight the range of comments raised through the survey.

- Funding from government to support institutions offering conservation courses as they are more expensive to provide than less practice-based subjects. Promotion of conservation and its value to the wider economy. Promotion of the valuable role conservation businesses provide by offering placements to students. Pay practicing conservators to give talks to students about their businesses, the pitfalls and positive aspects of being freelance or part of a company.
- Conservation is not a high priority particularly in institutions that are having to make cuts to save money. In Museums less time needs to be spent on exhibiting and more time on looking after the collections. Collection care needs to be given top priority in institutions and until that happens it will be very difficult to lobby for further investment in training. Conservation and collection care have been replaced with access and learning which should be supported by not prioritised instead of conservation.
- Understanding on the part of education providers that conservation education takes time and requires extensive one-to-one training; willingness to accept that such training will not be a money-spinner. Much greater public engagement to engender wide support. Collaboration with employers to encourage and support workplace-based training such as apprenticeships that still provides rigorous intellectual education in the field.
- Groups need to advocate for universities and government bodies to recognise the impact of conservation, and the importance of training. A network of tutors and resources for mentoring, questions and research could be made available. Independently, conservators need to advocate for awareness of the profession early and often (not just to the choir!) at schools and jobs fairs so more people are aware it is a viable career
- Need to continue to raise the profile of conservation and the role of conservators/ conservation in a rapidly changing world, and what conservators offer in the face of climate change etc. Perhaps seek out the wealthy, to fund high profile initiatives, new programmes/facilities, grants/ bursaries. [I hate this thought in many ways, with the increasing discrepancy between those with more wealth than they know what to do with, and those on below average salaries. But the wealthy do have funds which could be used to the great benefit of the profession.] Not a great time to be advocating it but perhaps helping to fund placements with high profile international organisations. Need to be aware asap when courses under threat, for example Camberwell.
- I think museums, galleries, private conservators could play a really positive role within conservation education. For example, perhaps by setting up schemes where during your masters course you have a year out, like a sandwich year in BA/BSC degrees where you go and work in a related workplace for a year or more - I believe the Dutch and French conservation education systems have something similar. Museums could employ conservation students for a year or 6 months, significant periods of time where students can really get to grips with working in a conservation environment and have the opportunity to learn and put into practice their skills.

How can the sector work collaboratively to get what we need?

Supporting the common themes, the most cited area for collaborative working was in developing a strong advocacy case for conservation education and the sector as a whole which could be used to lobby and influence decision makers. It was felt that this should be backed up by research to demonstrate the value and impact of the sector. Several respondents also highlighted the need to work with the wider heritage and arts sector who were seen to be experiencing similar issues to the conservation profession with respect to education.

It was felt that this could be combined with a wider advocacy effort targeting salaries and the working conditions of conservators which would support the pipeline of potential candidates into the profession.

Focusing more on the detail of the course content as a whole, it was felt that closer working relationships between education providers and employers would help to ensure that course content was fit for purpose.

Response	% Response
Developing advocacy case	16%
In developing greater employer and course links	11%
To work collaboratively across the arts and heritage sectors.	8%
Through advocating and supporting higher salary levels in the sector	8%
Working to get Apprenticeships off the ground	6%
In developing broader and more adaptable courses	6%
Cross education sector collaboration	6%
Undertaking an audit of what has happened to learn from the experience	4%
Outreach	4%
Develop practical working groups	4%
In undertaking further research to support the advocacy case	4%
Ensure private sector employers are included in the debate.	2%
Professional Body Involvement	2%
Assess level of jobs	1%
Courses - more vocational focus	1%
Considering different models of deliver, including "hub and spoke"	1%
To actively support the current courses	1%
Increasing employer support for programmes	1%
Employers - exchange programmes	1%
Establish "neutral ground" to support efforts	1%
In addressing funding and sponsorship to support programmes	1%
Icon to award degrees	1%
Establish more post graduate training opportunities.	1%
Encouraging the profession to be more outward looking	1%
Ensuring transparency in the debate	1%
Developing advocacy case	16%

Below we have picked out several specific responses which highlight the range of comments raised through the survey.

- Concerted lobbying of government etc. Acknowledge the role employers (including private workshops) have in training and support them in providing it. Outreach at all education levels, including schools, to raise awareness of conservation as a career option.

- Strategic outreach to educate decision makers in the importance and value of conservation. Investment in raising public awareness and support. Bringing together skilled craft workers and conservators to explore how their practices relate and can enhance each other.
- Education providers need to form links with placement providers. the student placement should not just be an opportunity to off load the teaching onto the placement provider.
- More opportunities for institutions and private conservators to work more closely with courses - provide support and training in a more holistic way for all students - not just for the lucky few who manage to get internships.
- The answer is within the question. We need to work with the wider heritage community: National Museum directors, the Historic Houses Association, the National Trust, Historic England/Wales/Scotland, the Association of Independent Museums, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings for example
- Collaboratively with each other, or with other organisations? Both needed. Pooling together of resources, joint initiatives where objects are the same. Using skills and knowledge from across the sector, and beyond. Need to identify where, and with whom, those skills lie. Align ourselves with those with similar objectives in other fields, and other networks: Climate Heritage Network, Heritage Alliance etc. I know Icon already is but continue this.

What are our key asks to government, funders and decision makers?

As well as highlighting specific areas, respondents' answers also presented suggestions as to what should be included in the case for support for conservation education generally.

Overall the comments tied with responses to other questions in the survey, including the need to access greater levels of funding.

Specific responses

Response	% Response
Access to greater levels of funding	9%
Funding to specifically target bursaries and training placements	8%
Greater salary levels which would encourage individuals to join the sector	2%
Funding which targets and supports training providers	2%
Develop courses at FE/schools level	1%
Protect courses as a 'national asset'	1%
Clearly explain the parameters so that a case can be developed	1%
Introduce 'MOT' requirement for heritage assets	1%
Ensure conservation is included on the ONS listing	1%
Funding to be accessed through broader CSR and private funding	1%
Funding for research	1%
Funding from charities / foundations targeting objects to include training requirement	1%
Ban unpaid internships	1%

In presenting the case for conservation

Response	% Response
Establish need for long term secured position	7%
The case should highlight the social value of conservation and impact on wellbeing	6%
Include as part of a case for the heritage sector as a whole	5%
Establishing the impact of cuts and loss of expertise	5%
Accept small profession / low numbers on courses	4%
Presenting conservation as core to heritage	2%
Explain how supporting education can support the diversity of the sector	2%
Produce an annual impact report	1%
Presenting the economic benefits of conservation	1%
The need for underpinning research	1%
Supporting the parity of profession alongside other heritage professionals	1%
Clearly demonstrating the time and complexity of conservation	1%
Ensuring that there is parity between academic and vocational training	1%
Quality over quantity	1%

Below we have picked out several specific responses which highlight the range of comments raised through the survey.

- It is important for the government, Universities and funders to realise that it is not possible to treat Conservation in the same way that other University courses are treated. What I mean by this is that where a viable Geography degree course might have 120 students per year on it and they might require some time in a variety of lecture theatres and might share some lectures with other courses this will not be the same for Conservation. There are likely to be much smaller course numbers and pro rata they will take up more space and require much more contact time for their course to be meaningful. All this has massive cost implications.
- UNDERSTAND that conservation underpins ALL the public facing activities that happen in heritage sites and museums, and that these activities benefit our economy hugely. If we want to carry on enjoying the rewards of cultural activities for tourists and our communities then we need to be able to look after our assets. And that's what conservators do!
- Greater recognition of the economic and societal benefits of conservation education through the language used to discuss the professional practice of conservation and related education and training pathways. The education and training required to become a skilled, knowledgeable and confident professional conservator can be equated with the pathway to becoming a surgeon as it takes many years to move from a novice to an expert.
- Supporting creative skills industry through supporting educational can only work if the colleges and educators exist, otherwise 20% is lost. They need to apply the levy to the colleges as well as to employers for apprenticeship scheme. decision makers are usually those who have no idea what conservation is, and the impact education has on a successful conservation set-up. make them culpable by creating an Act of Parliament on the responsibility to ensure tangible heritage, as well as digital, get government funding and support within the creative arts.

Do you have any other comments to make?

The final set of responses broadly reflected issues highlighted elsewhere in the survey. Below we have picked out several specific responses which highlight the range of comments raised through the survey.

- Having come to conservation as part of career change and having worked in other environments, I think conservation is an under paid and underappreciated profession. The educational and skill requirements for a career in conservation are immense - it is a highly skilled job that requires a lot of knowledge and experience. Conservators are the corner stone to preserving cultural heritage they are a key part of what ensures museums and galleries have a collection, which can be rightly enjoyed by the public. However, the levels of pay are woeful and when you compare this to the amount of outlay that new graduates will have put into their education it begins to close off doors, it reduces diversity within the employee pool and with that comes a natural closing in. All professions require a diverse workforce if they are to push boundaries and develop in a positive way that is both innovative and culturally sensitive. Diversity promotes discussion and creative thinking; it allows for new perspectives and creates dynamic and enjoyable workplaces. And until museums and galleries start leading by example by paying their highly educated and skilled staff appropriate rates of remuneration that reflect their level of education and skill, conservation will begin to suffer in the future.
- Courses such as the TCC and Camberwell take time to build up, can be destroyed in a very short time and are very difficult and time consuming to replace. If we cannot train our own conservators what shall we do? Use untrained but interested individuals who will cause damage by learning from their mistakes as they go? The cost of such damage will far outweigh the cost of supporting conservation courses. Leave our collections to decay? Again, the long-term cost will outweigh the savings made by cutting courses. Import foreign conservators? Unlikely, often salaries abroad are higher than in the UK, the £30,000 p.a. minimum salary required to be allowed to bring in EU workers after Brexit will leave many posts unfilled. Academic administrators who are 'saving' some money by cutting conservation and then using the space for more profitable courses are essentially taking money from the heritage sector - the loss in value (in every sense) of decaying objects etc. Such administrators are taking a small view, just their institution, which is understandable as that is their job. However, government should see the larger picture, see the wider benefit and prevent such closures in the wider interest.
- Conservation has developed a great deal over the 37 years I have been in the profession. It has acquired an Ivory Tower image, which has lost touch with many of the hands-on conservation professional conservators. The discipline isn't a science, it isn't an art, it isn't purely skill. It's understanding, aptitude, application and ability. That brings in science, art etc to the extent pertinent to the individual and their own scope of abilities.