Data management in perspective:
the career profile of conservators

The Research Information Network (RIN) and JISC were co-funders, in partnership with the Digital Curation Centre (DCC), of the Data Management Skills Support Initiative (DaMSSI), which supported five JISC research data management training projects*. These aimed to help researchers and their institutions to plan effectively the development of data management skills and training.

DaMSSI has drawn together a range of short career profiles to illustrate the relevance of data management skills to four graduate professions represented by the JISC training projects. These professions are: conservator; social science researcher; clinical psychologist and archaeologist. Each profile demonstrates how the value of data management skills learned alongside other research skills during graduate and post-graduate study contributes to and underpins high-quality professional performance. DaMSSI has also drawn up a career profile for describing the work of data managers, to help raise awareness about this emerging new profession.

This leaflet describes the first in the series of these profiles, covering the role of the conservator.

* Details of the 'RDMTrain' projects are available online at: www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/mrd/rdmtrain.aspx

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Studying to be a conservator

Conservators in the UK may initially study art, art history, or a conservation degree. This is usually followed by post-graduate study in a conservation specialism.

What conservators do

Conservators assume the responsibility for supporting and caring for objects, understanding the needs of objects if they are to continue to survive, and communicating these needs to relevant people such as owners, curators and the public. Research skills are central to the task of ascertaining the needs of objects, and so the gathering and management of detailed data about objects is crucial to success in the role.

Conservators may take preventive or intervenient action to slow down deterioration of objects, and may work with one or more of a huge range of object types. Some examples are paintings, clothing and other textiles including tapestry or carpets, furniture, sculpture, jewellery, timepieces, household items, pottery, metalwork, glassware, musical instruments, buildings, vehicles or paper-based objects such as books, manuscripts, photographs or drawings. They may also work with digital objects such as video, digital audio and digital art installations. Conservators tend to develop their speciality in a given area within this huge field: for example, they may specialise in textiles, works of art on paper or audiovisual media.

Conservators may work as freelancers, or within an institution. The role of a conservator is often shaped by the context in which they work; for example, some conservators work within the university research environment, either as members of staff or freelance contract staff for a particular project. A freelance conservator may work for an individual client to care for and advise about the maintenance or transport of an object or collection, which the owner may want to use and enjoy. Another conservator working within a museum context may find their work shaped by the deadlines for an exhibition, for which a certain collection must be ready for public view. When preparing work for an exhibition, conservators will work with the curator of the exhibition, who

will be responsible for the scope and arrangement of the exhibition pieces. Conservators working within the museum, gallery and library context often find themselves striving to balance the protection of the objects in their care with the demands of service users of that institution.

Daily duties and necessary skills

When caring for physical objects, main daily duties within the profession have long included a large amount of practical conservation work at laboratory or studio benches. This benchwork is still a very important part of the job, and much of the professional training of the conservator is concerned with teaching these practical skills. As many objects are constituted of a variety of materials (for example, one garment may include textiles, bone or metal fastenings and jewel adornments) conservators must have a wide range of knowledge about various materials.

Conservators routinely make decisions about the care and treatment of objects, and so must understand the principles of chemistry, biology and physics to be able to select treatments which will not damage objects or compromise their survival.

Conservators of digital objects will carry out equivalent work by identifying the significant characteristics of the digital recording or artwork and engaging in digital preservation practice to maintain these characteristics, and their interrelationship, over time. The physical media may or may not be maintained.

Communication of the needs and history of objects is another skill in conservation which is increasingly important. Many cultural institutions are under increasing pressure to maximise the impact and visibility of their collections, and so conservators are increasingly involved in communicating the unique values or story of the objects in their care to the public. Some museum exhibitions are the result of collaboration between conservators of many different types and successful management of these projects also require good communication skills.

Professional standards

Most conservators in the UK are members of ICON, the Institute of Conservation. After five years of professional practice, members are eligible to apply for 'accredited' status, which acts as a mark of experience within the profession and an ongoing commitment to upkeep of skills. The standards of practice required by the accreditation process in effect form standards of practice for the UK conservation field in general.

ECCO is the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorer Organisations, and their professional guidelines are the basis of professional guidelines for many other professional bodies within conservation, both within the UK and abroad.

The importance of good data management

Every decision which a conservator makes about an object is based on their understanding of the object's composition and history, the use to which the object is to be put and the requirements of the owner or curator.

The history of the object is, ideally, documented in data kept with the object, including details of any past conservation treatment. Similarly, the conservator must produce detailed documentation about any conservation decisions or treatment undertaken upon the object, in order to justify decisions made to the owner or curator, but also for the reference of future conservators. This is usually done as part of benchwork and may involve photographs of treatment at various stages, as well as written notes.

The ECCO professional guidelines, as also used by ICON in its Professional Guidelines, specify that the conservator "takes responsibility for … documentation of observations and any

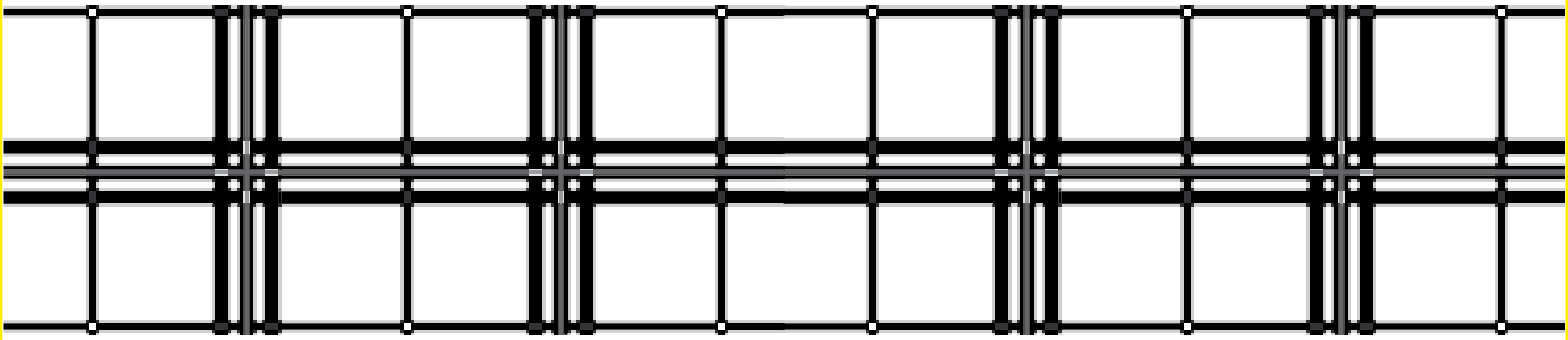
interventions", and goes onto to state explicitly that, "Documentation consists of the accurate pictorial and written record of all procedures carried out, and the rationale behind them. A copy of the report must be submitted to the owner or custodian of the cultural heritage ***and must remain accessible***. Any further requirements for the storage, maintenance, display or access to the cultural property should be specified in this document. The record remains the intellectual property of the Conservator-Restorer ***and shall be retained for future reference***."

ECCO Professional Guidelines, section I (2002) and reiterated in section II, article 10 (2003): Code of Ethics (our emphasis).

Some objects undergoing conservation treatment may be hundreds of years old, or could be expected to survive for hundreds of years more. This means that not only should documentation – whether photographs or written – be well-created, detailed and clear, but that active management of this documentation over time needs to be a high priority, in order for conservators to be confident they are fulfilling their professional obligations.

Although conservators still often have paper records and photos of objects in their care, such documentation is now often in digital form. In order for digital documentation to survive at least as long as the object it describes, it needs to be backed up regularly, stored securely, and managed in such a way that a connection can be found between the object and its documentation by other team members or in the future. As documentation is expected to have a considerable lifespan, conservators should also be aware of the importance of refreshing storage media, checking that existing data remains findable and accessible, and ensuring that only necessary and relevant documentation is preserved.

Maintenance of and contribution to this chain of evidence is a central responsibility of the professional conservator, and so the preservation and management of both paper and digital records is a key responsibility of the profession.



Further reading...

ICON: www.icon.org.uk

ICON three-stage approach to accreditation:
www.icon.org.uk/images/stories/threesteps.pdf

ICON professional guidelines:
www.icon.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=121

ECCO: www.ecco-eu.org

ECCO Code of Ethics: www.ecco-eu.org/about-e.c.c.o./professional-guidelines.html

There are many other published international Codes or sets of Professional Guidelines. One example is that of ICOM, the International Council of Museums (http://icom.museum).

The ICOM Code of Ethics is available at:
http://icom.museum/what-we-do/professional-standards/code-of-ethics.html

Data management training resources for postgraduate art conservation students are available from the JISC CAiRO project at: www.projectcairo.org/node/9