

Assessing professional practice 'in the field': experiences from the Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers

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Abstract

The Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers (PACR) is a practice-based assessment and accreditation framework operated jointly by three of the professional bodies in the cultural heritage sector. PACR was introduced in 2000 following trials in 1998-99.

Early evidence indicates that PACR, based on a detailed application and a full-day workplace visit by two assessors, provides a valid and rigorous means of assessing professional competence in the field of conservation. Although there have been teething problems, the first round of accreditation has worked effectively. The assessment methodology appears to have significant advantages over alternatives such as portfolio-based assessment, although there is also less margin for error and higher costs associated with rectifying any problems. The transferability of the PACR methodology is likely to vary with occupational field, with it being most applicable to occupations where it is possible to examine and discuss practical evidence on site.

Introduction

The assessment and accreditation of would-be practitioners forms a significant role for many professional bodies. The most common approach for bodies working from the dominant 'technocratic' approach to development (Bines 1992) is to concentrate on the assessment of knowledge, often supplemented by a minimum period of supervised or logged experience. More recently, concerns to ensure the competence and professionalism of practitioners - as distinct from their academic knowledge - has led to greater interest in assessing professional practice directly, rather than relying on written assignments, examinations or simulations. Some professions such as architecture and surveying include a professional practice assessment or requirement for a portfolio of work activity before the 'practising qualification' is awarded, although there is rarely an attempt to make a thorough assessment of practice.

A significant move to the assessment of work practice is represented by the UK's now well-established system of National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications (here abbreviated to NVQs). NVQs are generally awarded on the basis of competence in work activity, assessed either directly through workplace visits and observation, or indirectly through records, explanations and references relating to work activity. A small number of NVQs have been developed at levels 4 and 5, equivalent in level to many professional qualifications. However, less than 4% of all NVQs awarded have been at these levels, and their impact on the approaches used by professional bodies has been relatively limited.

The PACR framework (Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers) was developed by a consortium of professional bodies in the field of conserving cultural heritage and works of art (see Lester 2000). Its aim is to provide an assessment of professional standards independent of

practitioners' training or entry routes to the profession, which leads to the award of Accredited Conservator-Restorer status.

Accredited status is awarded through PACR by any of three professional bodies operating under the umbrella of the National Council for Conservation-Restoration (NCCR). It is pitched at the level of an experienced practitioner, perhaps four to five years after completion of initial training, and requires a mature approach to practice which demonstrates professional judgement and ethics, depth of practical understanding and contextual sensitivity as well as technical competence. For graduate and postgraduate entrants it has parallels with the professional practice assessment in some of the construction professions, while remaining open to people who have entered the profession through work-based training. Accredited status is subject to the practitioner continuing his or her development and practising in accordance with the profession's code of ethics.

Direct and indirect assessment

The emergence of higher-level NVQs during the 1990s was accompanied by an almost universal use of portfolio-based assessment. This kind of assessment involves the qualification candidate assembling a collection of items which act as evidence of his or her competence, and which can be assessed away from the workplace; for instance, for a management candidate this could include reports, meeting notes, letters, memos, budgets and so on, backed by an explanatory narrative and endorsed by 'witnesses'. The candidate normally cross-references these items against the components of the qualification before putting it forward for assessment. Typically, one or more assessors will examine the portfolio and discuss points with the candidate, before approving (or otherwise) achievement of the relevant parts of the award, subject to checks by a verifier.

Portfolio-based or indirect assessment has the advantages of enabling candidates to assemble evidence at a pace which suits them, keeping assessor time and therefore costs under control, and enabling the qualification to be achieved in stages rather than through a one-off assessment. There is also no sense of a 'test:' if the material provided is insufficient or not up to standard, the candidate can be advised to include additional evidence or if necessary gain additional knowledge or experience in the area concerned. However, it can involve candidates in doing a large amount of essentially unproductive and backward-looking paperwork, and there are many examples of competent practitioners who have failed to achieve NVQs because of the work involved in assembling portfolios (e.g. Lester *et al* 2000). The validity of indirect assessment can also be questionable, both because it is not good at capturing practical and interpersonal abilities and because it allows candidates to be selective in what is put forward.

More recently, there has been a gradual trend towards developing other approaches to assessing higher-level NVQs (see for instance Fowler 1997, Cullum & Sykes 1998). These approaches typically make more use of assessors visiting the candidate's workplace, examining evidence *in situ*, and discussing issues on-site with the candidate and his or her colleagues. While some paperwork is employed, it is usually limited to the candidate providing the assessor with pre-visit guidance on what to expect and providing explanatory narrative where necessary, and the assessor recording the visit and giving feedback to the candidate. Several visits are usually made, with feedback at the end of one visit assisting with preparation for the next. This approach is potentially more efficient and valid

than portfolio-based assessment, but it also requires more assessor time and is therefore likely to be more expensive.

The PACR scheme: assessment standards and procedures

The PACR scheme has some similarities with NVQs in that it is based on a set of professional standards describing workplace activity, rather than on standards of education or training. The NCCR professional standards comprise six sets of 'functional' criteria relating to conservation activities, and five general criteria (or common themes) which cover intelligent practice and professional judgement, ethics, continuing development, cultural sensitivity and communication. The functional criteria were adapted from the occupational standards developed by the former Museum Training Institute (MTI 1996), which formed the basis of the largely unsuccessful conservation NVQs, while the general criteria drew on the European FULCO project (Foley & Scholten 1998) and in terms of principle Anglia Polytechnic University's ASSET programme for social work (Winter & Maisch 1991).

During the development of the PACR framework it became clear that while the assessment needed to be rigorous and auditable, it also needed to have a high level of validity in assessing professional *practice* as well as avoiding burdening practitioners with portfolio-building. Furthermore, in a profession not noted for high salaries or levels of resourcing it also needed to be cost-effective, and an additional consideration was the need to be workable in the variety of contexts and specialisms in which practitioners work, from sole practices to large institutions, studio-based to peripatetic, paper conservation to stone conservation. The development consultation (see Lester 2000) supported a direct assessment approach, and a model was developed and trialled during 1998-99.

Practitioners who want to apply for accredited status approach their professional body (Institute of Paper Conservation, Society of Archivists or UK Institute for Conservation) and are provided with a set of scheme documents (NCCR 1999), also available freely from the NCCR and professional body web sites. The scheme is open to anyone working in conservation or restoration who is a member of one of the above bodies, but advice and guidance are provided to indicate the level of competence needed and discourage insufficiently experienced candidates from applying. Candidates complete a detailed form in which they are required to indicate what they will produce or discuss in relation to each area of the professional standards; before doing this they are asked to outline key projects or areas of activity they are or have been involved in, on which the application will draw. From 2001 applicants will also be required to submit a review of their personal professional development over the past two years, along with a plan for the next year. The application must be validated by two conservators of creditable standing ('sponsors') who know the candidate's work or have made a studio visit, and there is also space for 'witnesses' - who need not be professional conservators - to verify statements made by the applicant.

Applications are forwarded to the candidate's professional body, where an accreditation committee makes an initial examination and raises any queries. Two assessors are then allocated to the applicant: a primary assessor from the same specialism (e.g. paper conservation, textiles, stained glass), who is nominated by the professional body, and a secondary assessor from a different area of conservation, identified by NCCR. Assessors are also selected so that, for instance, a private practice candidate will have at least one assessor with private sector experience.

Provided the application suggests that the candidate has a reasonable chance of meeting the professional standards, assessment is carried out by the two assessors making a full-day visit to the candidate's studio or workplace. The visit needs to be well-planned in order to ensure that assessment, discussion and feedback can be fitted into the day. At the end of the day, the assessors record their decisions against each individual area of the standards; this can be that they are satisfied the candidate is competent, the candidate has demonstrated a good level of working knowledge in the area concerned but has no evidence of practical competence, or that the criteria have not been met. A short period is allowed to resolve any queries at this stage. The completed application, with assessor comments and decisions, then goes to the accreditation committee of the candidate's professional body. The committee acts as a moderation panel and can decide to approve or withhold accreditation according to the scheme's guidelines, or refer the candidate for limited reassessment by a further visit or by indirect means. Candidates who fail to achieve accreditation are able to reapply twelve months after their assessment or referral visit; there is also recourse to appeal, initially to the professional body and finally to the NCCR Professional Standards Board.

Assessor selection, training and quality assurance

Assessors and accreditation committee members for PACR are drawn from practising conservators or recent practitioners who are themselves accredited (a simplified 'fast-track' accreditation system for experienced practitioners had been operated by the professional bodies before the introduction of PACR). Committee members are volunteers; assessors are contracted on a per-assessment basis.

During the trial, assessors and committee members attended a one-day training session before carrying out their assessments. This day covered assessment principles, interpretation of the professional standards, and discussion and simulation of assessment scenarios. Following broad agreement that additional input was needed, a second workshop day was added when the scheme went 'live,' held after assessors had received candidates' applications but before the visits were carried out. This day enabled specific issues and queries to be discussed and resolved, and common interpretations of the standards to be agreed. A guide for assessors is also included in the scheme documents, and additional materials such as a question-and-answer paper have been circulated to assessors and committee members.

Given that all visits are carried out by two assessors, there are no current plans to include any additional direct monitoring of assessment visits. The allocation of assessors is planned to ensure rotation and avoid established pairs forming. Beyond that, assessors are expected to attend an annual review conference. The accreditation committee plays a central role in ensuring consistency and fairness of assessments, in that it is able to review all the applications and assessments in any one year, and direct queries to assessors and candidates where there are uncertainties or differences in interpretation. The committee can also play a moderating role, adjusting the final decision following further investigations to compensate for any particularly harsh or lenient assessment decisions.

During the trial, the possibility of assessors achieving the Employment National Training Organisation's units D32 and D33 (the standard qualifications for NVQ assessors) was examined. The units were found to be impractical for two reasons: their award is officially restricted to NVQ assessors, and there are some important differences between the requirements reflected in the units

and the procedures adopted in PACR. The possibility of a custom qualification for assessors has not been ruled out, but no further action has been taken.

Application and assessment

By March 2001 two cycles of assessment had taken place in PACR: a trial with 13 volunteer candidates carried out as part of the development process, and the first live round of 16 assessments made between October 2000 and January 2001. Although the trial resulted in amendments to the standards, application form and to a lesser extent to the process, the approach used was in principle unchanged. One change which was introduced was that assessors no longer make an overall recommendation about accreditation, but the accreditation committee now makes a decision based on the assessors' findings in each area of the professional standards. This was felt to improve consistency and remove some of the pressure for assessors to make a decision on the day.

Eighteen initial applications were received in 2000, a manageable but disappointing number given over 60 expressions of interest. Further investigation indicated that pressure of work, the cost of the process, and wanting to wait until the scheme was better established had combined to discourage early applications. Of the 18, one was advised to withdraw or defer because of his lack of experience in practical conservation, and two were advised to amend their applications; one of these, who had submitted a partially-completed form, did not respond, and the other, where there was initially uncertainty about the advice that should be given, had her assessment delayed until April 2001.

During the trials a particular format to the assessment day had proved effective, and this was adopted as the recommended approach for the 'live' scheme. This approach involved a short introduction and orientation discussion, followed by the candidate taking the assessors through his or her work. This informal presentation typically took up the remainder of the morning, and involved examination and discussion of objects (i.e. items that were being, or had been, treated by the conservator), the studio or workshop, and documentary evidence such as records, reports and photographs. In most cases these were as described in the application, although in some cases objects had been returned to clients or put on display, and alternatives were presented. The assessors then conferred to decide which areas of the standards needed further discussion or evidence, before returning to the candidate with a specific list of questions and requests to see information or objects. Following a further short conference, the assessors discussed their findings with the candidate, providing an opportunity for further explanation if the candidate felt any essential points (or evidence) had been missed. This basic format was largely followed for the live assessments, with a slight variation in that while some assessors found they could finalise the process on the day, others needed more time to reflect before making decisions, and discussed these with the candidate shortly after the visit.

Candidates' feedback on the application and assessment process was generally positive; the process was typically seen as hard work, but worthwhile and well handled. Apart from the credential gained, several candidates saw benefits in the process of peer review and in being asked to reflect on their practice and their careers. Completing the application document and getting validation was felt to be initially daunting, and to an extent time-consuming; however, this was not felt to be out of proportion to the importance of the credential. Some candidates felt the form was 'difficult' until they had worked out that they could cross-reference the same projects and activities to different professional standards. Most but not all candidates had had some support with their applications, including from

trial candidates, an assessor, colleagues at work, their sponsors, or committee members. The majority of candidates also found the written guidance in the scheme documents informative and helpful.

With one exception the assessment visits were seen as rigorous, fairly conducted and generally enjoyable, with the majority of assessors being commended for an open and professional approach. Over half the candidates commented on the value of having a secondary assessor from outside their specialism, this helping to "take the debate much deeper... by not accepting things at face value" (PACR candidate interview). Occasionally the secondary assessor was seen as not playing a very active role in the process. Other than some minor points which did not affect the overall result, the only serious complaint concerned an assessment where several points were disputed, decisions appeared to stray away from the requirements of the professional standards, and the process was described as confrontational.

The majority of assessors also reported positively on their experience of carrying out their assessments. A small minority felt uncomfortable making judgements about fellow-professionals' work, and in the instance described above there may have been confusion between personal standards and preferences and the requirements of the scheme.

Moderation

During the trial there was no formal moderation meeting, although the project steering group carried out a review of the trial assessments. In PACR proper, the accreditation meeting was preceded by a workshop run along similar lines to the assessors' second training day, enabling committee members to raise and discuss issues in a joint forum with the project consultant. Given that this was the first live round of PACR assessments, the committees examined all applications and assessor records in detail. The majority were approved for accreditation, with one adjustment where one candidate's assessors had interpreted one of the standards unnecessarily strictly.

Three applications were referred for reassessment. The case referred to previously proved difficult to moderate because of conflicting evidence and argument, and while the committee was not prepared to uphold the assessors' decisions it did not have enough evidence to justify reversing them. A substitute assessment visit was agreed with new assessors, to take place free of charge within the next year. The other cases had effectively been 'passed' by the assessors, but the committee picked up among other things insufficient evidence of practical conservation work; both candidates were asked to provide additional evidence for reassessment.

The latter cases revealed some lack of clarity in the guidance that had been given to candidates on the importance of practical conservation, both in the documents and in the initial screening of applications by the accreditation committee. More specific guidance on this area has since been incorporated into the scheme documents.

Issues arising

The scheme appeared to be reasonably practicable to operate during both the trials and for the first round of applications. Overall costs have not been calculated, but they are likely to be much higher

than the £400 charged to candidates: this covers most of the direct costs (assessors' fees and expenses, copying, postage, accreditation committee expenses), but ignores indirect costs such as development and review costs, assessor and committee training, staff time in the professional body offices, and briefings provided to candidates. As a professional body accreditation scheme PACR is financially workable because it is subsidised by the participating bodies (and it received external funding at the development stage). However, the costs may make it expensive for an awarding body to operate an external qualification in the same way, unless a high fee level can be charged.

Discussions with candidates and assessors, and examination of assessors' records, indicated that most assessments were carried out professionally and fairly, and were felt by all involved to have a high level of validity and rigour: it would be difficult for a candidate who was less than proficient to convince the assessors and accreditation committee otherwise. The one exception where problems arose involved a breakdown in the dialogue between assessor and candidate, where contributing factors appeared to include differences in personal style and possibly overcritical interpretation of some of the standards. Forestalling this kind of problem appears difficult, and it may be a hazard in the early stages of the scheme until new assessors can be paired with experienced ones. Further enhancements to assessor training have been proposed, along with a working meeting for updating and feedback purposes, although these may be unnecessary for the majority of assessors and they need to be balanced against added costs and the demands they would make on assessors' time.

While conservation employs techniques and practices where relatively uncontentious assessment decisions can be made, in common with other professional activities it also involves making judgements in complex and uncertain situations. The validity of assessment in PACR depends on assessors being able to interpret the professional standards in a way that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate individual judgement, preferences and expertise, but sufficiently rigorous to rule out unacceptable practice. This suggests that assessors need the confidence and competence to enter into an open dialogue that may challenge their perceptions of good practice, while also having a clear perception of the boundary between what is acceptably innovative or expedient, and what is incompetent, unethical or damaging. While some assessors and committee members expressed concerns in this sense, problems were only encountered in the one case mentioned above.

A related issue raised by assessors for both the trials and the first round of assessments concerned the standard that actually needed to be applied. Guidance was given in the scheme documents that the standard expected was that of an experienced practitioner working under his or her own initiative, producing institutionally or commercially acceptable standards of work, and demonstrating a 'post-graduate' (sic) depth of understanding (NCCR 1999). The Dreyfus model of skill acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1984), which classifies performance across a five-level scale from novice to expert, was found useful by some assessors to understand the level of competence needed ('proficient' on the Dreyfus scale). This has been incorporated into the revised scheme guidance (NCCR 2001), and post-assessment the indication is of acceptably consistent interpretation into the different specialisms of conservation.

The accreditation committee and moderation process also experienced some teething problems. Some misunderstandings were encountered between candidates and committees both before and after assessment visits, and it is perhaps ironic that the part of the system that was designed to increase fairness and consistency was seen by some as the least transparent or accountable. Formal

guidance for committee members has been produced for 2001, and greater dialogue is being encouraged between committee members and assessors. Overall, few of the people involved in PACR during 2000-01 were also involved in overseeing or taking part in the trial, and this has created a discontinuity of understanding which is taking time to overcome. However, these problems are less likely to occur in the future as people become inducted into the scheme and the turnover of committee members and assessors reduces.

Finally, the ultimate utility and fairness of the single assessment visit used in PACR must be kept open to review. Experience from the trial and the first round suggests that if the outcome of the visit is positive, the process is probably more efficient and cost-effective than indirect or multiple-visit assessment, as well as being more valid than at least the former. There is also an argument that it is more valid and reliable to require a candidate who has failed to meet the standards (rather than being referred in one or two areas) to undergo a complete reassessment after having had sufficient time and advice to make good the deficiencies. However, where referral visits are needed, the cost-effectiveness is likely to be considerably diminished. The system is also less able to deal efficiently with any need for reassessment, as encountered in the current round, than is an indirect approach.

Conclusions

Experience to date suggests that the direct assessment approach used in PACR offers a highly valid and relatively efficient way of assessing conservators' professional practice and competence. To work effectively, it requires detailed information to be provided beforehand, careful preparation for the visit, and an organised and focused approach on the part of the assessors. There is less margin for error than in indirect assessment or where multiple visits are used, requiring competent assessors and clear communication; if problems do occur, the burden falls on the moderation panel (i.e. the accreditation committee) and the follow-up actions needed may be time-consuming both for those involved in assessment and moderation, and for the candidate. As provided for within the guidelines of the scheme, indirect assessment might be considered for referrals where it is not critical that assessors visit the candidate's workplace.

The transferability of the PACR process to other professions and occupations will depend largely on the type of work being assessed. The assessment visit is appropriate in PACR because much conservation work is tangible and visible, and it is generally possible to build up a rich picture of a practitioner's work through examination and discussion of objects, materials and equipment, and documentary evidence, on site or in the workshop or studio. A single visit becomes less appropriate when evidence is less tangible and is more amenable to collection over time; for instance, the author was recently involved in discussions about accreditation in the field of occupational rehabilitation, where practitioners assist the return to work of people who have suffered injury or health problems, frequently through a case-management approach. Equally, there are other situations where a site visit will yield little information beyond that which can be gained through documentary or computer-based work products, which can be discussed off-site.

While PACR offers less flexibility to the candidate than most established approaches to NVQ assessment, this must be balanced against increased validity and rigour, a definite timescale (notwithstanding some delays to getting results to candidates, the time from application deadline to results being announced was just over six months), and what promises to be a substantially higher

completion rate. The methodology used in PACR is likely to be worth considering in contexts where the type of work is amenable to visit-based assessment, and where it is desired to verify proficiency and professionalism rather than provide a programme of development and continuous assessment.

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The documents for the PACR scheme are available at www.nccr.org.uk/accredit.htm or www.devmts.demon.co.uk/pacr/.

Acronyms

ASSET	Accreditation of Social Services Experience and Training
FULCO	Framework of universal levels of competence
MTI	Museum Training Institute (now Cultural Heritage National Training Organisation)
NCCR	National Council for Conservation-Restoration
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
PACR	Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers

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