Building a profession

The development of the Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers: a form of professional systems architecture

DProf project 1998-2002: Stan Lester

The author

Stan Lester has been a consultant and systems developer in work-related education and training since 1993, and is one of the UK's leading experts on professional standards and qualifying processes. He previously worked in further education and as a training manager, completing an MEd in professional and vocational education in 1994.

About the project

The project is principally concerned with developing a qualified professional status ('ACR') in the field of conserving material heritage, along with the associated processes of assessment, conferral and regulations for maintenance. It also formed one of the focal points for drawing together the conservation community to form a new professional institute.

Background

The UK conservation community has been working towards some form of definition as a profession since the introduction of the first conservation degrees in the 1930s. Conservators in most fields are now typically graduates or postgraduates, though some still enter through informal work-based training.

The situation by the late 1990s included:

- a fragmented community – 12 professional associations for less than 4,000 people, plus a loose umbrella organisation
- lack of clarity about what's meant by a 'qualified conservator'
- perceived inferior status compared with colleagues (e.g. curators, architects and archivists), with some conservators employed on technician grades
- a lack of training posts or early-career structure for graduates to bring them up to a professional level
- international and European codes of ethics, but a repeated failure to establish any form of recognised professional qualification.

The author was engaged as a consultant to the conservation community in 1998 to facilitate the development of a process to lead to a robust qualified status (what became known as 'PACR').

Process

The process used an adapted action research/soft systems methodology, with three cycles within the doctoral project:

- developing a 'rich picture', reviewing what has and hasn't previously worked, reviewing relevant cases and literature, consulting on approaches, developing a model for testing, carrying out trials, and reviewing
- refining the model, developing operational guidelines and carrying out training, running a first 'live' round, and reviewing
- making operational changes, running a second live round, evaluating process and impact, and making recommendations for future development.

The project also engaged with developments in other professions and with work-based education and training more generally.

PACR

The Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers is a set of standards, processes and regulations that govern how conservators gain and maintain qualified status ('Accredited Conservator-Restorer'). It is based on the ability to practise effectively and ethically, supporting a variety of routes into the profession rather than specifying particular academic qualifications or training processes.

Impact on the profession

Approximately 700 conservators now hold ACR status, with a 2007 review confirming the robustness and relevance of the qualification and as well as its increasing recognition among the wider heritage community (including appearance in job advertisements, invitations to tender, funding conditions etc). The introduction of PACR has also been an important factor in helping the conservation community to form an authoritative professional body (the Institute of Conservation, Icon) in 2004. There is also evidence that Icon and PACR have raised the profile of the conservation community and the perceived status of conservators among related professions the wider heritage sector. A 'spin-off' development, a qualification for conservation technicians, was launched in 2007 and has been well-received by conservation employers.

Outside the UK there has been exploratory work to launch a similar framework and professional institute in Israel, as well as interest in Portugal and Germany. Recognition across Europe has been slower because of the emphasis in some countries on the academic qualification as giving fully qualified status.

Impact beyond the profession

The approach used in PACR has been widely disseminated through journal articles, conference/seminar presentations, and through the author's work with other clients. The qualifying process is beginning to influence other professions' entry routes, while the professional standards model has been adapted for use in landscape architecture and vocational rehabilitation, as well as influencing the design of occupational standards away from models based on functional analysis. The approach to continuing professional development has been cited by among others the Institute for Learning as a good example of a practitioner-centred rather than an inputs-based model.

Journal articles

The following articles were included in the DProf submission:

Lester, S (1999) "Professional bodies, CPD and informal learning: the case of conservation," *Continuing Professional Development* 2 (4), 110-121

Lester, S (2000) "The Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers: developing a competence-based professional assessment system," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 25 (4), 411-423

Lester, S (2001) "Assessing professional practice 'in the field': experiences from the Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers," *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 6 (2), 175-185

Lester, S (2001) "The construction of qualification levels and frameworks: issues from three UK projects," *Higher Education Quarterly* 55 (4), 396-415

Lester, S (2001) "Professional accreditation and National Vocational Qualifications: an exchange of experience," *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 53 (4), 577-593

Lester, S (2002) "Becoming a profession: conservation in the United Kingdom," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 23 (1), 87-94

Lester, S (2003) "Qualifications in professional development: a discussion from the perspective of conservators in the UK and Ireland," *Studies in Continuing Education* 25 (3), 269-283

These additional papers were published after later, related work:

Lester, S (2007) "Professional practice projects: APEL or development?" *Journal of Workplace Learning* 19 (3), 188-202

Lester, S (2008) *Routes and requirements for becoming professionally qualified* Bristol, Professional Associations Research Network (research series)

Lester, S (2008) "Putting conservation's professional qualification in context," *The Conservator* 31, 5-16

Lester, S (2009) "The Conservation Technician Qualification: an employer-led development," *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 14 (1), 43-55

Lester, S (2009) "Routes to qualified status: practices and trends among UK professional bodies," *Studies in Higher Education* 34 (2), 223-236.