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Jane Henderson & Robyn Sloggett

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Jane Henderson ¹ and Robyn Sloggett ²

¹Department of Archaeology and Conservation, John Percival Building, Cardiff University, Colum Road, Cardiff, UK; ²The Robert Cripps Institute for Cultural Conservation, University of Melbourne, Swanston Street, Carlton, Australia

Conservation education dialogue and its consequences for a changing sector

Abstract

This article explores dialogical criticism as an apparatus in the construction, development and calibration of conservation education. It examines both implicit and explicit critical conservation education discourse and how this dialogue is manifested, activated and purposed. The specifics of critical discourse around conservation education are then examined in relation to the professional, political and economic exigencies that frame such responses to conservation education (specifically) and tertiary education (more broadly). Finally, the resolution of critical dialogue and its role in strengthening or diminishing the reputation of conservation education programmes is analysed. The article concludes that critical conservation discourse is most beneficial when conducted with clear objectives, including how best to support the development of reflective professional conservators who can develop appropriate skills for a vibrant and changing sector.

Keywords

conservation skills; conservation education; conservation training; dialogical criticism; manual skills; conservation profession

Introduction

Challenges to conservation education are not new, nor unusual.¹ This article examines the development, promulgation and effect of discussions about conservation education. In doing so, it draws on a range of published sources, from peer-reviewed journal articles to internet bot-generated criticisms, to identify productive ways for conservators to engage in discussions that strengthen the future of conservation education and, therefore, conservation. Dialogical criticism enables discourse to be analysed through various viewpoints, and anomalies, that often form the basis for differing opinion, to be contextualised across various voices. It is a useful framework to analyse discussions and to consider aspects such as misinformation, divergent understandings and pervasive commentary as often occurs through social media. It can enable analysis of influence and impact in ways that quantitative analysis cannot. In conservation it can be useful for examining how contextual and monological viewpoints might influence debates, and how divergent viewpoints might best be informed to achieve constructive dialogue. In this respect, it may assist in understanding how the incipient effects of social media can affect discourse in conservation.

This article also draws on standpoint theory to locate the authors' position and interests. Standpoint theory acknowledges that a person's understanding of the world is shaped by the social position from which they experience it.² Standpoint theory is relevant in any values-based argument. Our standpoints are as long-term conservation educators, preceded by

¹ Cf. for example, Robyn Sloggett, 'Conservation Skills', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 45, no. 3 (2022): 157–72; Julian Bickersteth, 'Training for Working—Is Conservation in Alignment?' (Abstract, AICCM National Conference, Katoomba, NSW, 1–3 November 2017), <https://aiccm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Training-for-Working.pdf> (accessed 8 August 2026); Michael Kirby-Tally quoted in Jean Brown, 'Conservation Now', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 40, no. 2 (2017): 131–55; Jonathan Ashley-Smith, 'Losing the Edge: The Risk of a Decline in Practical Conservation Skills', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 39, no. 2 (2016): 119–32; Colin Pearson, 'Colin Pearson Interviewed by Jan Lyall in the Conservation and Preservation Profession in Australia Oral History Project' [sound recording], 2003, Session 2 57:37, 58.48–58:51, National Library of Australia.

² Sandra Harding, 'A Socially Relevant Philosophy of Science? Resources from Standpoint Theory's Controversiality', *Hypatia* 19, no. 1 (2004): 25–47; Kimberly Phillips, '"We Come Not Here to Talk"—Revisiting the Work of Anna Julia Cooper: An Analysis of Standpoint

Contact Jane Henderson (hendersonlj@cardiff.ac.uk); Robyn Sloggett (rjslog@unimelb.edu.au)

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Theory and Her Placement in the Academic Canon', *Symbolic Interaction* 46 (2023): 311–31, <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.632> (accessed 8 August 2026).

3 See for example, Denise Jackson, Bonnie Amelia Dean, and Michelle Eady, 'Equity and Inclusion in Work-Integrated Learning: Participation and Outcomes for Diverse Student Groups', *Educational Review* 77, no. 2 (2023): 329–50, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131911.2023.2182764>; Caitlin Kemp et al., 'How Do Students Offer Value to Organisations through Work Integrated Learning? A Qualitative Study Using Social Exchange Theory', *Advances in Health Sciences Education: Theory and Practice* 26, no. 3 (2021): 1075–93, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33641049/> (both accessed 8 August 2026).

4 Icon (Institute of Conservation), *Icon Education Roundtable Debate: Who Values Conservation Education? Summary of Icon Member Survey*, February 2020, <https://www.icon.org.uk/resource/who-values-conservation-education.html> (accessed 8 August 2026).

5 Cf. for example: Matthew Lesh, 'Let's Be Honest, Spending Three Years at University is a Waste of Time for Too Many', *CityAM*, 29 August 2022, <https://www.cityam.com/lets-be-honest-university-waste-of-time/>; 'Heritage Professionals Respond to "Woke Archaeology" Claims', *Museum Journal*, 19 December 2023, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museum-journal/news/2023/12/heritage-professionals-respond-to-woke-archaeology-claims/> (both accessed 10 August 2026).

6 *Weaponised Pasts*, *Weaponised Pasts*, n.d., <https://weaponisedpasts.org/index.html> (accessed 8 August 2026).

7 Cf. Ken Sutherland gives overviews of some of the controversies in painting conservation. See Ken Sutherland, 'Chapter 1. Cleaning, controversy and research' in 'Solvent Extractable Com-

extensive careers in conservation practice. We recognise that our understanding and therefore our writing is shaped and constrained by our own lived experiences. Our careers have been based in Australia and the UK, and this is reflected in the predominance of evidence in this article. We believe that the critiques that we address are particularly obvious to us in the UK and Australia, which has been the prompt to address them here, but that they occur elsewhere in a similar vein. With insider privilege, we have been party to discussions and data about the higher education sector that is not always made public.

The route from practitioner to academic has been a common trajectory within conservation education programmes, but it is an unusual pathway within the wider tertiary education sector. An emphasis on using objects in teaching and internships for skills development, has placed conservation education at the forefront of many pedagogical initiatives, including object-based and work-integrated learning.³ Increasingly seen within the university sector as an effective teaching model for professional legitimacy, this non-traditional route of drawing on practice to inform teaching has had to be fought for. In this article, we offer a good-faith challenge to open a discussion about how the field of conservation can best strengthen public and professional discourse about how to support this alignment between practice and education.

A persistent tension in conservation education arises when collegial discourse frames the challenge as a lack of adequate hands-on training, while institutions frame it as economic sustainability. The apparent intractability of these positions is unhelpful. The student perspective is that their courses are 'extremely expensive and quite prohibitive' while 'there are not many jobs in the museum sector'.⁴ As a result, students, who are investing most in the future of conservation, are wedged in a debate that is neither of their making, nor of their choosing. It is this impact on students that informed the authors' considerations in this article.

Dialogical analysis, as related to criticisms of conservation, identifies where an argument may connect to, or stem from, broader debates. For example, it is important that discourse around what to prioritise in conservation (for example, objects and their materiality or people and their voices, ergo which objects and what voices) remains separate from the wider 'culture wars' debates and related critiques of disciplines.⁵ Acknowledging broader framings is important in dialogical discourse to avoid monological bias having weight in pluralistic, professional decision-making. Keywords such as 'culture' or 'diversity' are currently prime targets for internet bots. As a result, critiques of conservation education, as is the case with a range of contemporary debates, may become entangled with bot-generated criticisms.⁶ This type of criticism is different to constructive professional discourse such as occurs with issues such as cleaning or degrees of intervention. We argue that dialogical discourse can limit the problem of non-evidence-based incursions that delegitimise constructive discourse in favour of monological provocations.

In exploring dialogical criticism two aspects that are critical of conservation emerge. First, public discourse about conservation is generally disinterested in conservation education but does criticise conservators for being too interventionist and too hands-on.⁷ Second, criticisms of conservation education emanate almost exclusively from within the conservation profession, and focus on the need for increased hands-on training (otherwise discussed as 'manual', 'skills', 'practical' or 'tacit' training). Such critiques may also co-locate the need for more 'hands-on' training with the implied or stated requirement for less theory and reflection. There presents a problematic dichotomy. Codes of ethics and conduct which guide the conservation profession are, in part, aimed at securing the public repu-

tation of conservation. For this reason, it is worth exploring how to secure effective methods of discourse for the purpose, value, methods and validity of criticism of conservation education by conservators.

Parameters

1 How conservation discourse is conducted

It is a recognised heuristic that where people believe they are acting for the benefit of others, their sense of doing something for the greater good can reduce self-reflection on the quality of their own practice. Research suggests that people faced with utilitarian-type questions can choose deliberate ignorance to rationalise a course of action that they believe supports the greater good.⁸ This may be the result of confirmation bias—the unintentional preferencing of evidence that supports a pre-ordained position—or reduced scrutiny of available evidence. A belief in the virtue and validity of their own intent may then make individuals resistant to feedback. In an evidence-based profession such as conservation, criticisms of orthodoxy are a necessary part of critical engagement, but to be valuable they need to be appropriately positioned.

Where high-profile critique comes from outside the profession, it sometimes uses strong, if not derogatory, terms to describe the conservation practices being criticised. Such criticism is often posited as well-informed and for the greater good. James Beck and Michael Daley provided one of the more well-known examples of this, focussing the debates around the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel, the treatment of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, amongst many others.⁹ In these instances, conservators rallied to defend colleagues.¹⁰ Earlier public debates, such as the cleaning controversies of the National Gallery of London or the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia, led the sector to produce strong, unified and proactive responses.¹¹ As a rule, faced with external critique, conservators have been proactive in supporting colleagues by explaining conservation decision-making, and the guidelines and codes that conservators adhere to in order to ensure quality.

Professional colleagues without doubt criticise conservation education in the belief that they are progressing well-informed debates for the good of the profession. As the quality of conservation education impacts the future quality of the profession, such debates are important. However, criticisms of conservation education often lack a well-rounded understanding of the complexity of developing, delivering and sustaining conservation education programmes. The *modus operandi* of mounting public external criticisms of conservation education without engaging with conservation education programmes appears as a legitimised form of commentary from within the profession.¹²

2 Conservation education criticisms within the profession

An examination of the language and rhetoric of the debates helps unpack some of these criticisms. Within conservation discourse, there are several critical terms and concepts used interchangeably. In one of the most often cited papers that raises concerns about conservation education, 'Losing the Edge: The Risk of a Decline in Practical Conservation Skills', Jonathan Ashley-Smith substitutes and transposes the terms practical, tacit and manual skills. While the claim is that 'this article is specifically about the development of practical skills',¹³ the terms 'practical', 'practice' and 'manual skills' are used interchangeably. By way of example, the paper cites the 1984 ICOM-CC Definition of the Profession that 'at all stages of training, major emphasis should be placed on *practice*', commenting that the 'percentage of time dedicated to developing *manual skills* has been

ponents of Oil Paint Films (unpublished thesis, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2001), 1–29, https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/3748782/18806_UBA00200053405.pdf (accessed 8 August 2026).

⁸ See, for example, André Mata, André Vaz, and Bernardo Mendonça, 'Deliberate Ignorance in Moral Dilemmas: Protecting Judgment from Conflicting Information', *Journal of Economic Psychology* 90 (2022): 102523, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2022.102523> (accessed 8 August 2026).

⁹ James Beck and Michael Daley, *Art Restoration: The Culture, the Business, and the Scandal* (London: John Murray, 1993). See also Elaine Sciolino, 'Leonardo Painting's Restoration Bitterly Divides Art Experts', *The New York Times*, 3 January 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/04/arts/design/clash-over-restoration-of-leonardos-virgin-and-child.html?searchResultPosition=2> (accessed 8 August 2026).

¹⁰ See for example, Farcroft Group, *Triumph or Travesty? The Controversial Restoration of the Sistine Chapel*, 21 February 2020, <https://www.farcroftgroup.com/the-controversial-restoration-of-the-sistine-chapel/> (accessed 8 August 2026).

¹¹ The Burlington Magazine, 'The Burlington Magazine and the National Gallery Cleaning Controversy (1947–1963)', blogpost, 11 July 2015, <https://burlingtonindex.wordpress.com/2015/07/11/the-burlington-magazine-and-the-national-gallery-cleaning-controversy-1947-1963/>; David Bomford, 'The Conservator as Narrator: Changed Perspectives in the Conservation of Paintings', in *Personal Viewpoints: Thoughts About Paintings Conservation*, ed. Mark Leonard (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2003), 1–12; Alex Ellem, '"Danger and Decay": A Restoration Drama Concerning the National Gallery of Victoria, 1899', in *Paintings Conservation in Aus-*

tralia from the Nineteenth Century to the Present: Connecting the Past to the Future. Essays, Recollections and Historical Research on Paintings Conservation and Conservators, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present. Contributions to the Eleventh AICCM Paintings Group Symposium, held at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, October 9th & 10th, 2008, Chapter 11 (Melbourne: Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material, 2008), <https://aiccm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2008-AICCM-PTGS-SIG-Paintings-Conservation-in-Australia-from-the-Nineteenth-Century-to-the-Present-Melbourne.pdf> (both accessed 8 August 2026).

12 Icon, *Icon Education Roundtable Debate*.

13 Ashley-Smith, 'Losing the Edge', 122.

declining'.¹⁴ Conflating 'practice' and 'manual skills' becomes problematic as they can constitute different forms of practical knowledge. Practice is not always manual, and has a wider meaning, referring to the application of knowledge and ideas which define professional practice.

Agreed and consistent terminology is important, particularly for complicated discussions such as those about the value of education. Are 'practical skills' specifically related to the material as opposed to any other practised activity? Arguments about necessary skills need critical terms to be clearly defined. The argument predicated on one use of the term 'practical skills', used to describe 'skills for high-level hands-on conservation', becomes complicated when transposed across a range of meanings.¹⁵ 'Practical skills', sometimes described as 'know how', are competencies built through experience, which stand distinct from knowing why something is done.¹⁶ Practical skills refer to things we can do, from making a soufflé to operating a laser cutter, but they are also human skills such as working well in a team. Practical skills can relate to problem-solving needed by the conservator tasked, for example, with putting an antique coffee machine back together without instructions. Finally, practical skills include life skills such as how to do an interview that will help you get

Table 1 A range of generic graduate skills mapped across to conservation practice—as identified in (a) Wong et al. (2022), see note 17; (b) QAA (2024), see note 18; and (c) Ananthram and Klarin (2026), see note 19.

Generic skills	Cited	Examples as applied to conservation practice
Adaptability and innovation	(a); (b); (c)	Developing new techniques and perspectives for conservation such as introducing a new piece of equipment
Creativity	(a); (b); (c)	Challenging habits and dogma to create unexpected but beneficial solutions appropriate to stakeholders and other users
Communication (oral, written, visual, virtual)	(a); (b); (c)	Creating time and space to listen to the views of others and to integrate this into the conservation decision-making
Decision-making	(a); (c)	Considering a range of options and evaluating them against transparent and agreed criteria
Digital literacy	(a); (b); (c)	Collecting and collating data such as environmental data to track threats from fluctuating humidity
Ethical practice	(a); (b); (c)	Investigate more sustainable materials for a familiar task
Leadership	(a); (b); (c)	To direct a consistent standard and approach to a large conservation task such as the conservation of a large outdoor mural
Interpersonal	(a); (b); (c)	Negotiate the timeline of a treatment or collaborate to agree outcomes
Organisational	(a); (b)	Delivering a conservation outcome to an agreed schedule such as an exhibition opening
Problem-solving/critical thinking	(a); (b); (c)	When presented with an object, we create questions to devise a response, typically: how did it get to its current condition, why and what does that mean, what will happen next, who for etc.
Responsibility for personal development	(a); (b); (c)	Developing appropriate skills for new conservation challenges
Resilience	(a); (b); (c)	Revisiting a solution which has not been successful after the first iteration of treatments
Teamworking	(a); (b); (c)	Coordinating the input of several people on a single conservation project such as a large tapestry
Technical	(a); (b); (c)	Manipulating a scalpel or a mouse
Time management	(a); (b); (c)	Ensure a conservation project is completed in time for its intended use—i.e. exhibition

the job. Therefore, the term ‘practical skills’ is not exclusively associated with work at the bench. So why has the question: ‘what types of practical skills does a conservator need?’ become this complicated?

Dialogical criticism can assess differences in terminology and meaning by analysing texts and, in doing so, enable the development of clearer parameters within debates. The question of what skills and attributes are required from graduates in general has been discussed in a number of recent publications. Billy Wong et al. collected and compared graduate attributes from Australia, New Zealand and the UK.¹⁷ A team of Welsh academics at the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Cymru published skills that would preference graduates for employment.¹⁸ Subramaniam Ananthram and Anton Klarin have published a recent thematic analysis of capability statements from Australian public universities.¹⁹ Table 1 brings together a non-exhaustive selection of attributes that feature in many such lists. The research shows different priorities between educators but also a great deal of commonality across higher education. Whilst discipline-specific skills are vital, these reflect contemporary generic skills that should feature in conservation education. Considering skills from a broader perspective does not diminish the disciplinary importance of conservation skills. As the QAA Cymru report discusses, some jobs will need technical skills but also ‘for most roles I think the general attributes are probably more important to employers’.²⁰ Furthermore, Ananthram and Klarin’s research indicates that employers expect core skills to change rapidly, requiring re-skilling over the course of a career.²¹ Demonstrating how conservation delivers generic skills helps establish its status in academia (Table 1). Producing resilient and adaptable conservation graduates will enable them to navigate and thrive in an evolving world.

3 Dialogical discourse analysis in conservation

Dialogical analysis enables the broader ecosystem that frames discourse to be analysed and assessed. This is useful when considering web-based data where the source is not easily verifiable, but the discussion is active and increasing. In examining this phenomenon, Ngram analysis on data from social media posts can capture large-scale patterns in public-facing statements. As Fig. 1 indicates, the term ‘Mickey Mouse degrees’—a culture war shorthand for ‘worthless’²²—has increased recently, but how this might influence conservation education is unclear. Such utterances, whether by human actors or bots (generated in what is known as ‘astroturfing’), can be effective in shaping public understanding.²³ Currently, in the UK barely any announcement about universities is made without public comments questioning the value of education, often associated with undisguised hostility to overseas students whose fees and contributions have been propping up the economies of higher education in many of the world’s other richest economies over many years.

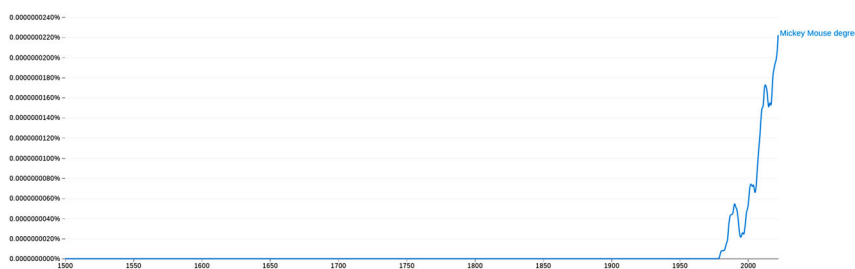


Fig. 1 The Ngram for the term ‘Mickey Mouse Degree’, ‘Mickey Mouse Degree’, Google Ngram Viewer, accessed 23 July 2026.

14 Ashley-Smith, ‘Losing the Edge’, 123.

15 Ashley-Smith, ‘Losing the Edge’, 119.

16 Cf for example, Jeremy Fantl, ‘Knowledge How’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2012 edition, 4 August 2012 [Spring 2021], <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/knowledge-how/> (accessed 8 August 2026).

17 Billy Wong et al., ‘A Mapping of Graduate Attributes: What Can We Expect from UK University Students?’, *Higher Education Research & Development* 41, no. 4 (2022): 1340–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1882405> (accessed 8 August 2026).

18 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Cymru, *What Are the Key Attributes of a Graduate in Wales and How Can We Foster the Development of These Attributes?* Report, August 2024, https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/41838/1/qaa25_cep_graduate_attributes_report_2024-english_final.pdf (accessed 8 August 2026).

19 Subramaniam Ananthram and Anton Klarin, ‘Graduate Capabilities and the Future of Work: It All Comes Down to GRIT’, *Higher Education Research & Development* (2026): 1–16, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07294360.2026.2694412> (accessed 8 August 2026).

20 QAA, *What Are the Key Attributes of a Graduate*, 30.

21 Ananthram and Klarin, ‘Graduate Capabilities and the Future of Work’.

22 See, ‘Mickey Mouse Degree’, *Google Ngram Viewer*, n.d., https://books.google.com/ngrams/interactive_chart?content=Mickey+Mouse+degree. ‘Google Ngram is a search engine and dataset that graphs the frequency of words or short phrases (n-grams) in millions of digitized books. It is used to track historical language trends, study cultural shifts over centuries, and analyse changes in spelling, grammar, and vocabulary usage from 1500 to 2022’, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_Books_Ngram_Viewer (n.d.). Contemporary ‘culture wars’ are considered to have started in the 1990s and grown in impact ever since; see for example, Bobby Duffy and Kirstie Hewlett, ‘How Culture Wars Start’, *Kings College London News Centre*, 24 May 2021, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/how->

[culture-wars-start](#) (both accessed 1 August 2026).

23 See for example, Thomas Zerback and Florian Töpfl, 'Forged Examples as Disinformation: The Biasing Effects of Political Astroturfing Comments on Public Opinion Perceptions and How to Prevent Them', *Political Psychology* 43, no. 3 (2022): 399–418, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.12767>; Harry Yaojun Yan et al., 'Exposure to Social Bots Amplifies Perceptual Biases and Regulation Propensity', *Scientific Reports* 13, no. 1 (2023): 20707, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10673860/> (both accessed 1 August 2026).

Internet bot posts exhibit a low threshold when tested for verifiability, but there is a danger that bot-generated commentary has the potential to bleed into the mainstream press and debates. Tracing how terms circulate, shift and gain resonance across these platforms provides empirical evidence of the evolving public discourse. In discussions on education we see common features across both social media and the press, including fear of overseas students and declining standards. Determining where, and how, the voice of the conservation profession enters this debate, enables strategies to be constructed that strengthen the profession against pernicious incursions. Rather than driving reactions, dialogical criticism provides data on what may be emerging public trends, and where these are being developed, thus giving the conservation profession the ability to foreground any issues in its own social media, public statements or other avenues that enable entry to the discussion.

Some current discussions of education in the public domain demonstrate the kinds of issues that may arise if conservators are not productively engaged in these debates. For example, dialogical analysis in the field of 'education' identifies common themes that emerge across public media. Students as people are not considered valid due to a criticism of their identity, and courses are a wasteful use of resources because they are not as good as they used to be or no longer address meaningful topics. Such discourse places students in the middle of such attacks as well as diminishing the value of their financial and emotional investment in their future, and just as importantly, the future of conservation. It could be argued that currently no single group is investing more in the future of conservation than students. Within this broader framing, criticism about conservation education by conservation professionals becomes self-defeating if it does no more than act as a layer within other forms of criticism.

Using dialogical criticism to improve debates in conservation education

1 Conservation as an academic discipline

Conservation is a discipline aligned to a profession. Based on scholarship, enquiry, evidence, analysis and innovation, and tempered by a framework for interrogation and verification, academic disciplines sit within academic institutions. Academic disciplines are marked by specific theories, methodologies and practice which are systematically researched and taught, to address specific subjects. Academic disciplines built on traditions of knowledge, and calibrated by the evidence of practice, are constantly integrating new data within established frameworks that then are evolved to serve foundational problems in a changing world. An effective discipline drives forward ideas and activities, examining and developing its boundaries to create new challenging, exciting opportunities. A healthy discipline seeks to constantly reimagine its own paradigms and create new parameters.

The emergence of the conservation profession is marked by a growing scholarly community, an established history of enquiry, defined methods for interpreting data, clear standards for new knowledge, and an effective communication network.²⁴ Conservation practice can exist as a craft, as a process and even for a short time as a profession without the existence of the academic discipline. Plumbers or jewellery makers do not need a discipline to exist. Conservation has different obligations with its commitment to preserving the evidence of people's cultural identity. The necessity for innovation in academic disciplines ensures that, with the systematic production and dissemination of research, new ideas move into the field. New ideas provide a counter to traditional practices, ensuring that appropriate progress and adaptation arise based on new knowledge and perspectives.²⁵ The 'know how' of conservation practice is calibrated and shaped by the connected 'know that' which is based on theory and

24 Cf. for example, Martin Davies and Marcia Devlin, *Interdisciplinary Higher Education: Implications for Teaching and Learning* (Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, 2007), <https://pesa.org.au/images/papers/2007-papers/davies2007.pdf>, cited in Robyn Sloggett, 'Expanding the Conservation Canon', *Studies in Conservation* 54, no. 3 (2009): 170–83, <https://doi.org/10.1179/sic.2009.54.3.170> (both accessed 8 August 2026).

ethics. This ensures the growth of an adaptable profession that can solve complex problems.

2 Dialogical criticism and understanding strengths

Tertiary education in conservation gained momentum in the second half of the twentieth century. Since then, conservation has developed in response to changing social values and shifting societal needs, and its periods of growth have aligned with moments of crisis as well as developments in science. For instance, the rise of more affordable analytical techniques in chemistry and physics during the 1980s and 1990s coincided with a rapid increase in conservation courses.²⁶ This focus has shifted as conservation focusses on its relevance to shifting social issues.²⁷ In line with this, conservation teaching has become more socially conscious.²⁸ As a result, the ability to be adaptable, and to adopt new methods and approaches, is essential to maintain discipline relevance. New forms of practice need to inform old ways of doing and knowing. This may be embraced by new generations of practitioners who welcome the challenges, or feared by those who feel their knowledge is undervalued by an evolving body of knowledge. Adaptation is not always easy. For example, course closure is often seen as a threat and indication of failure, but may be indicative of a fast-evolving profession rather than a specific weakness of conservation. More established professions might be expected to have more stable structures, and consequently less flux in values, culture and institutions, specifically here in higher education. It is worth recognising that stability can exist at the price of responsiveness and adaptability.

3 Tracking conservation course closure or renewal

The changes in the profile of conservation education provide a complex story of proactivity and adaptive response that is increasingly concerned with new knowledge, social good and evidence-based research. This, as much as the history of the conservation profession, has defined the field at least since the establishment of the first conservation laboratories from the late nineteenth century.

This is also the reason why, when programmes have been threatened with closure, there has been an active professional response. In 2009, the University of Southampton made the decision to close the globally renowned Textile Conservation Centre (TCC) because ‘postgraduate conservation education is a resource-intensive activity’.²⁹ Nonetheless, since that closure the MPhil. Textile Conservation programme at the University of Glasgow, which continues the work of the TCC, is thriving, teaching textile conservation as:

‘a multi-disciplinary field combining scientific analysis and a knowledge of textile history and techniques with the practical skills necessary to carry out conservation treatments ... a fascinating combination of analytical problem-solving and hands-on work as well as the chance to extend and develop knowledge of our rich textile heritage.’³⁰

In 2003 in Australia the only conservation education programme in the country at that time—located in the University of Canberra—announced it was closing after failing to find subsidy from any national institutions:

‘University management had lobbied institutions including the National Museum for funding, after it was forced to close two heritage courses. ... University Vice Chancellor Roger Dean says without funding the course can not reopen. “Essentially we just cannot afford to continue it any longer ... You can’t ask students to pay the amount of money that it would have cost”.’³¹

²⁵ Sloggett, ‘Expanding the Conservation Canon’; Jane Henderson, ‘Beyond Lifetimes: Who Do We Exclude When We Keep Things for the Future?’, *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 43, no. 3 (2020): 195–212; Joelle Wickens and Debra Hess Norris, ‘The Imperative of Soft Skill Development in Preventive Conservation Practice and Training’, *Studies in Conservation* 63, Sup. 1 (2018): 301–6; Marcelle Scott, ‘Towards a Post Normal Theory of Cultural Materials Conservation’, *AICCM Bulletin* 36, no. 1 (2014): 3–11.

²⁶ Michael Derrick et al., ‘Some New Analytical Techniques for Use in Conservation’, *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 33, no. 2 (1994): 171–84, <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/jaic/articles/jaic33-02-008.html> (accessed 1 August 2026).

²⁷ Joel Taylor and Hélia Marçal, ‘Conservation in the Performative Turn’, *Studies in Conservation* 67, no. 1 (2022): 260–6.

²⁸ Brian Castriota, ‘Attunement as an Embodied Methodology for Conservation Practices’, *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 48, no. 3 (2025): 175–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19455224.2025.2547339> (accessed 8 August 2026).

²⁹ For an exegesis of the closure and the reasons given in a publication by DEMOS, a UK ‘think tank’ with a cross-party political viewpoint, see: Samuel Jones and John Holden, *It’s a Material World—Caring for the Public Realm* (DEMOS, 2008), <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/Material%20World%20-%20web.pdf> (accessed 1 August 2026).

³⁰ University of Glasgow, ‘Textile Conservation’ webpage, <https://www.gla.ac.uk/postgraduate/taught/textileconservation/optionalcontent/> (accessed 8 August 2026).

³¹ ABC News, ‘Conservation Degree Won’t Get Reprieve’, 20 April 2003,

https://www.abc.net.au/news/2003-04-20/conservation-degree-wont-get-reprieve/1839498?utm_content=link&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_source=abc_news_web (accessed 8 August 2026). Fortunately, by 2008 the University of Canberra had reversed its decision and reopened a new conservation programme.

32 Library of Congress, 'Conservation Education: Commemorating Library Conservation Education Programs', 2011, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021688766/> (accessed 8 August 2026).

33 Cf. for example, MaryJo Lelyveld, 'On Advocacy—A Rejoinder', *AICCM National Newsletter*, 140 (2017), <https://aiccm.org.au/network-news/on-advocacy-a-rejoinder/> (accessed 8 August 2026).

34 Cf. for example, Jones and Holden, *It's a Material World*.

35 University of Melbourne, 'Masters by Coursework in Cultural Materials Conservation: Fees and Scholarships', n.d., <https://study.unimelb.edu.au/find/courses/graduate/master-of-cultural-materials-conservation/fees/>; Cardiff University, 'Conservation Practice (MSc) Tuition Fees', n.d., <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/taught/courses/course/conservation-practice-msc> (both accessed 8 August 2026).

36 Peter Scott, "'Student Experience' is the New Buzzword, But What Does It Mean?", *The Guardian*, 4 February 2014, www.theguardian.com/education/2014/feb/04/university-education-not-just-about-student-experience (accessed 8 August 2026).

37 In the US the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation conducted a survey of salaries for conservators. See: Foundation for the Advancement of Conservation, 2022 FAIC Compensation Survey (Washington, DC: FAIC, April 2022), <https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/CONSERVATIONUS/f79adbf7-4737-43c9-82a1-92e0d2cc3c1c/UploadedImages/Documents/Resources/Surveys/2022-FAIC-Compensation-Survey.pdf>. Similarly, in the UK the Institute of Conservation published a guide to salaries. See: The Institute of Conservation, *Conservation Salaries*, 2026, <https://www.icon.org.uk/careers/jobs/conservation-salaries.html> (both accessed 8 August 2026).

38 Jones and Holden report that: 'The equipment and materials of conserva-

The closure in 1992 of the University of Columbia's School of Library Service's conservation and preservation programme led to a programme move to the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). This programme then closed in 2009 'due to inadequate funding' although subsequent training provision at three graduate schools for art conservation in the US piloted new programmes in an attempt to meet this need.³²

This pattern of closures, with a focus on funding limitations, highlights the challenge that 'conservation is expensive',³³ and while the case has been made that conservation is a social good,³⁴ academic institutions that are unable to draw funding from the organisations who need trained students can only balance budgets by cross-subsidy from some of their other programmes. Here lies the crux of the problem for conservators: those who advocate for the costly training are unable to support that financially, which powerfully delinks the voice of protest from any influence.

It may be that some criticisms of conservation education are mounted without the necessary understanding of the context in which higher education is delivered. A starting observation is that the investment in conservation education by students and the institutions that educate them is significant. Costs of a Master's degree range internationally but it would not be unusual—at the time of writing in 2026—to see domestic fees of 67,200 for Australian students and 102,884 for internationals (see Note 34), and in the UK, fees of around £23,400 for domestic students and £53,400 for international students.³⁵

At the same time, a commodification of higher education has seen a move from learners to customers, and from a goal of learning to one of 'student experience'.³⁶ Within this neoliberal framework, the value of education is posited in terms of economic gains on graduation, not of personal growth, happiness or development of any of the skills suggested in the literature (see Table 1). For conservation, this poses quite a challenge. A practical lab-based conservation degree at Master's level is often twice as long as a conventional Master's degree. Teaching is expensive as it is both lab- and lecture-theatre-based and involves the complexities of managing interactions with cultural heritage materials as well as clients and community. Students may enjoy the combination of classes, the uniqueness of their practical and research projects, and their clear connection to the profession. They may experience challenges in having to master analytical science, haptic skills, communication, ethics and project management, but they are unlikely to find themselves in the upper echelons of wage earners, as graduate conservators are often not well-paid.³⁷ The investment made by universities and students to sustain the profession of conservation is significant.

In line with this, the argument has been mounted that trends in conservation curriculum reduce hands-on skills development as an exercise in budget balancing.³⁸ This claim ignores the core question for conservation educators, dealing with complex questions of culture and intensified interdisciplinary engagement, in a challenging and changing twenty-first century. Given students are not dealing with material where skills and interventions are more straightforward, but with *cultural* material, what curriculum can best equip students within an increasingly complex, problem-based learning framework? Teaching students to navigate this complexity has neither the cost advantage nor the pedagogical framework provided in the model based on lecturing 150 history students in a single room. For conservators invested in hands-on skills, it may appear that conservation educators undervalue laboratory teaching,³⁹ but the complexity of educating conservators belies such simple linearity. First, there are contracted workloads for academics that are negotiated in workplace agreements. Academic workloads are contractually defined, and universities judge

excellence through both teaching and research. Emphasising skills training without equivalent research activity is therefore difficult, as research contributes directly to institutional income. Reduced research capacity lowers funding and increases reliance on student fees. Second, this fee-dependent model also raises equity concerns and risks embedding anachronistic approaches. Framing conservation education merely as preparation for low-paid employment further undermines its disciplinary legitimacy, creating instability evident across the history of conservation training. Education lifts people up to be. Conservation needs graduates who can 'become', rather than who 'are' equipped to respond to workplace change. Finally, the authors also believe that learning and growth that incorporates problem-solving, situational analysis and communication enable students to have more choice in their future.

With strong interdisciplinary and cross-cultural skills, conservation graduates should be able to move into, and out of, the conservation sector with relative ease. A conservator who has studied problem-based learning, communication and teamwork has skills they can transfer from conservation. The ultimate ambition for conservation graduates might be as prime minister, museum director or journalist, all roles where advocacy for conservation is possible. Providing a skill set for a particular type of organisation at a particular time limits the validity of conservation education, and the ability of conservation to act as a wellspring for innovation, growth and happiness regardless of subsequent career.

What are the goals of conservation?

An important part of the discussion about conservation education is the fact that conservation as a discipline is more than the sum of the tasks and the ambitions for professional recognition and reward. We may sometimes choose to define conservation at an operational level to clarify our place in institutions and projects and to communicate the value of the profession. However, this approach can obscure the more visionary or strategic goals. Rebecca Fifield captured this approach, stating:

'We keep things that are meaningful to us. As a culture, we seek to sustain tangible items of meaning to center us. That requires preservation. We preserve these things personally, as institutions, as communities.'⁴⁰

Broader skill sets are required to preserve meaning as well as materiality. As the social responsibilities of conservation evolve, professional values and skills also evolve. The historic reliance on hard-science frameworks should be guided by cultural and social approaches. This shifts conservation from positivist, material-science methods toward interpretivist, social-science perspectives. Positivism centres on empirical testing and evidence-based conclusions, while interpretivism engages belief, experience and social context. Reframing these approaches is essential as social needs change, enabling the profession to articulate its mission more clearly.

When wildfires or floodwaters decimate a community and its cultural material, conservation needs to decide if hand skills define us. Is conservation education intended to prepare graduates with specific technical skills or is it to prepare them to support cultural heritage preservation for communities by adapting and deploying skills accrued through their formal education and beyond? Conservation is now at an inflexion point where multiple mutually enriching routes into professional life (conservation social practice, conservation policy, conservation treatment, conservation science, etc.) could feature with different emphases in education programmes. Diverse curricula can produce agile practitioners able to

tion are expensive and the studio-space required is large. ... Staff-to-student ratios are of necessity low ... conservation education does not easily fit into an economy of higher education in which student numbers and the fees that they bring are required to balance the bottom line' (Jones and Holden, *It's a Material World*, 41); and that 'In 2006 the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee stated that "under the current governance and funding structure, the maintenance of the science base for conservation, and with this the long-term preservation of the United Kingdom's cultural heritage, are severely under threat"' (Jones and Holden, *It's a Material World*, 21).

³⁹ Cf. Icon, *Icon Education Roundtable Debate*.

⁴⁰ Rebecca Fifield, 'Preservation is Us', 2020, <https://www.rfifield.net/preservation> (accessed 9 August 2026).

respond to heritage loss, influence policy and build sustainable professional futures.

Secure terminology—a case study examining conservation in practice

We offer a case study of a recent conservation project to present an audit of the skills required to undertake it and to illuminate the skills needed in real conservation practice. The project is representative of the type of work conservators are often involved in and offers a description of a recognisable if complex conservation project that is simply described and in the public domain.

Sarah Spencer's multimedia artwork, 'Stargazer' (2022), was part of an exhibition at the State Library of Victoria (SLV) that opened in June 2023. This complex conservation project—involving acquisition, care, display and preservation—was significant enough to feature in a two-part blog on the SLV website.⁴¹ The blog describes the exhibition as celebrating:

'the power of creativity, the possibilities of craft for teaching us about the world, and the stories of women and their often overlooked but innovative contributions to the artistic and scientific fields.'⁴²

In presenting the results of our analyses of the blog on the complexities involved, Table 2 repeats categories from the 'Generic Practical Skills' column as described in Table 1. The SLV blog text is then aligned accordingly in Table 2's Example in Case Study column.

The blog text demonstrates how conservation professionals may enter a situation as a book or textile conservator, but, in reality, a conservator's career is never so siloed. Although conservation specialisms do have individual tasks pertinent to challenges, whether block lifting in archaeological conservation or exquisite sewing skills for a textile conservator, these conservation-specific technical skills all sit within a bigger, common skills framework. This further underscores the proposition that the specialist skills of conservators encompass the range captured in Table 1.

Through the course of any career, a conservator will need to develop conservation-specific technical skills that change and evolve with the changing needs of their career and changing institutional and societal contexts. If our cultural heritage is expressed digitally, then understanding how to care for digital culture must be part of our conservation 'know how' even if this is new for those trained before the digital era. The role of higher education is not to prepare a graduate to be an exact fit to the specific skills required in their first place of employment. It is to produce professionals with an ability to develop and grow to match these changing needs.⁴³

Dialogical criticism—the value and consequences

Critiques of conservation education may be well-intentioned, but such criticisms land in a political discourse that neglects nuance, prefers easy solutions and proliferates hostility to inclusive cultural practices. When conservation work is framed as easily taught through apprenticeships or short training, it reinforces the view of craft rather than profession. This positions conservators as technical support for other cultural professionals, valued for dexterity but not for disciplinarity nor reflective practice. In the twenty-first century, this is a significant professional risk. Prioritising tacit skills sidelines the knowledge, ethics and intellectual frameworks sustained through specialised pedagogy, and undermines efforts to create learning environments where such professional capacities can grow.

The debates relating to conservation education also sit within broader discussions about higher education, which in many countries has moved to valuing the value of education transactionally rather than through

41 Jessye Wdowin-McGregor, 'Knitting, Coding, and the Stars: Caring for a Time-Based Media Artwork in a Library Collection—Parts 1 & 2', *State Library of Victoria Blog*, 4 August 2023, <https://blogs.slv.vic.gov.au/news/exhibitions/knitting-coding-and-the-stars-caringfor-a-time-based-media-artwork-in-a-library-collection-part-1/> (accessed 8 August 2026).

42 Wdowin-McGregor, 'Knitting, Coding—Part 1'; Wdowin-McGregor, 'Knitting, Coding—Part 2'.

43 Cf. for example, Jane Henderson, Ashley Lingle, and Phil Parkes, 'Levels of Competence in Conservation Education', *Conservation* 360, no. 3 (2024): 107, https://monografias.editorial.upv.es/index.php/con_360/article/view/314 (accessed 8 August 2026).

Table 2 Mapping the skills typology (Table 1) to the case study of the conservation of 'Stargazing'. All quotations are from the cited blogs.

Generic practical skills	Examples in the case study
Adaptability and innovation	'"Stargazing" required careful consideration and planning for its exhibition display, its physical and digital conservation, and upon deinstallation its preparation for long-term storage. In addition, the presence of an app designed by the artist, which enables the interactive part of the map and lights up the constellations, is a type of born-digital item that is new to the library collection.'
Creativity	'As an artwork that only comes to life once installed and interacted with, "Stargazing" requires different conservation and collection management practices to ensure its longevity and accessibility.'
Communication (oral, written, visual, virtual)	'A video record of the elements unique to the moment of display, like the experiential and interactive nature of the artwork, further adds to the documentation.'
Decision-making	'There are several factors to consider when undertaking this type of treatment, including what an object is made of (some materials can be damaged at low temperatures), the scale and complexity of an object, and objects comprising multiple material types that may be affected differently.'
Digital literacy	'The circuit board/development boards speak to an app designed by the artist, which was loaded onto two iPads included in the installation of the artwork during the exhibition.'
Ethical practice	'Unlike more traditional collection objects, time-based media artworks are at risk of becoming inaccessible through rapid software, file, and hardware obsolescence. If left unchecked, this type of loss can remain disquietingly invisible until the work is revisited for display or access.'
Leadership	'After a demonstration by Sarah using a small-scale prototype of "Stargazing", work began on gently parting the woollen threads of the knitted map.'
Interpersonal	'Drawing on the library's professional relationship with Museum Victoria, "Stargazing" was transported to the museum's commercial walk-in freezer, which is large enough to accommodate oversized objects, such as taxidermy lions!'
Organisational	'These types of artworks are particularly challenging to collect, exhibit and preserve, requiring both physical and digital conservation expertise, and the ability to manage rapid technological obsolescence.'
Problem-solving/critical thinking	'An important consideration for any oversized object in the library's collection is planning how to safely move it around the building and whether it will fit through the doors, corridors, stairwells, and lifts!.'
Responsibility for personal development	'An artist questionnaire was provided to Sarah Spencer, designed to gather detailed technical and equipment specifications related to the artwork, devised by our Senior Digital Preservation Specialist in the Collection Development and Description team. It is hoped this will assist with long-term conservation decisions related to obsolescence and transmission of the artwork's digital components over time.'
Resilience	'It also meant that if any issues were to arise with the circuitry or failure of LEDs during the relatively long exhibition period, repairs and troubleshooting could take place.'

(Table continued)

Table 2 Continued.

Generic practical skills	Examples in the case study
Teamworking	'The blog also highlights the mighty collaborative efforts of a team of staff from across the library, including Collection Care, Audience Engagement, Collection Curation and Engagement, and Collection Development and Description.'
Technical	'Work began on gently parting the woollen threads of the knitted map (using tools like wooden skewers and sewing needles) to allow small light wells attached to the underlay to be pushed through.'
Time management	'Under tight time pressures with the exhibition launch looming, staff tested a series of alternate adhesives on a small section of the underlay, in close consultation with the artist.'

intellectual growth and social value. In this neoliberal climate, the demand is that education offers a return on investment, often judged as the ability of graduates to earn above national wage averages. With challenging employment prospects and geopolitical shifts affecting student mobility, this is a hard metric for conservation educators to achieve. Hemmed in by perceptions of financial failure, the same educators are at the forefront of defending the need for secure laboratory time and time to foster professional connections with heritage stakeholders, both of which support students to develop conservation approaches grounded in real-world priorities and collaborative values. If the professional discourse emphasises manual skills above complexity, advocacy and executive decision-making and the profession appears lukewarm about the value of the discipline, then educators stand alone.⁴⁴

44 Cf. Pearson, *Interview, Session 2*.

45 Cara Waters, 'As the Royal Exhibition Building Crumbles, Its Internal Murals Face a Worse Fate', *The Age*, 13 March 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240313043604/https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/as-the-royal-exhibition-building-crumbles-its-internal-murals-face-a-worse-fate-20240312-p5fboq.html> (accessed 8 August 2026).

When comments are made about conservation courses not 'provid[ing] adequate manual training' the intention might be to drive up standards.⁴⁵ However, the mechanism for this is unclear, and the effect of driving down student confidence is more apparent. The validity of both students and their courses is consistently under scrutiny. Globally mobile conservation students are vulnerable to education policies driven by debates on immigration that target students. When senior conservators with hiring power publicly dismiss the need for a plurality of skills, those looking for employment on graduation must fear that the interview panel sitting opposite them has already decided that they don't really have sufficient 'practical skills', and barely respect the communication, digital, problem-solving and team-working skills that the graduate has already developed. They might reasonably be confused by a profession where public statements focus on lack of practical skills, but position descriptions are aligning to the broader employability-focussed skills listed in Table 1, prioritising those very skills that are being dismissed.

Considering dialogue for the future

If conservators believe that certain aspects of conservation courses are essential, then it is important to articulate and advocate for them. Many professions regulate and certify university courses to mark their successful graduates as approved by the profession. This requires the industry-based professionals to identify what it is that is essential and why, and for the academically based professionals to interrogate and respond with clarity and resolution. The profession can insist that their professional titles and recognitions are only offered to those who attain these essential qualities. Given the difficulty that the conservation profession has in enforcing a minimum

salary for a professional role, it seems that we are still a long way from operating a closed shop.

Dialogical analysis also highlights dialogical symmetry or asymmetry. Any discourse that proposes one party act for the benefit of another should be prepared to answer the question: What will they do in return? If employed conservators make demands on the professional courses, the question that must be returned to is: 'What are you prepared to do in response?'. These challenges help scrutinise the question: What does it mean for the profession to make such demands on educators if, as professionals, they are not able to commit to supporting that demand? Further questions arise: What stake does the conservation profession hold in the value of conservation education as an end in itself, without the transaction of employability or salary? What skills do graduating students have to act as strong advocates for the profession, in whatever role they adopt in the future? Is the argument that conservation learning must be operationalised and instrumentalised for it to have any value? Is learning only to be deemed a success by the profession when graduates are immediately able to work within the particular requirements of a studio? And considered a success by society if they are rewarded by above-average wages in these posts? Answering such questions is an important part of future discourse about conservation training.

Leverage points

Further analysis indicates that while critiques of conservation education might effectively identify critical elements in conservation education for the future of the profession, discussion around appropriate interventions is less clear. Donella Meadows, in her seminal book on systems theory, notes 'although people deeply involved in a system often knew intuitively where to find leverage points, more often than not they pushed the change in the wrong direction'. She goes on to add 'it is easier to find the point than to know which way to pull the lever and often that is counter intuitive'.⁴⁶

Success in identifying the leverage points for future change is therefore not necessarily an indicator of the accuracy of the subsequent ways to make that change. It is therefore possible to welcome the correct identification of a challenge in conservation education, whilst entirely rejecting the solutions proffered. Indeed, exactly as Meadows identifies, the solutions proffered for conservation education may pull the lever in exactly the wrong direction. Without full support from the profession, higher education institutions are unlikely to prioritise the cost and complexity of teaching conservation practical skills. For this reason, maintaining discourse that encourages constructive, dialogical critique, that can be effective for securing strong conservation futures, is essential.

Constructive engagement

Conservation pedagogy is a profession and a skill. Educators create learning environments which support learners to find their own abilities and develop confidence in their understanding and experience of the world. An educator has succeeded when the student feels that they have done the work and it is their achievement. Educators scaffold the learning process, supplying the conditions and instruments for growth. This process is not an accident but a deliberate and informed set of considerations and skills. In such a system, interventions, such as commentary from within the profession, or policy shifts from without, are interconnected and co-dependent in that both affect the constituency where change is being proposed. Risk accrues when this constituency is the subject not the co-designer nor contributor to such interventions. For

⁴⁶ Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008), 146.

⁴⁷ Cf. for example, Stuart Norton, 'Framework for Enhancing Student Success in Higher Education', Advance HE, <https://advance-he.org/knowledge-hub/framework-enhancing-student-success-higher-education/> (accessed 1 August 2026).

⁴⁸ Icon, 'Novice to Expert Scale', <https://www.icon.org.uk/static/756e0e21-4876-4d17-9fc75ee435261335/Novice-to-Expert-Scale.pdf> (accessed 10 August 2026).

⁴⁹ Icon, 'Icon Professional Standards', www.icon.org.uk/resources/standards-and-ethics/icon-professional-standards.html (accessed 2 August 2026).

those that are the subject of these interventions, failing to take time to understand, take account of and engage with this complexity indicates a lack of due diligence. In the field of conservation education, where the profession must be able to engage effectively in dialogical discourse, this demonstrates a lack of respect for colleagues and students. Student success is a complex concept, involving academic achievement and the transition to employment, entrepreneurship or further education. It also includes a deepening understanding and engagement with the discipline or subject, alongside the acquisition and enhancement of skills and personal growth.⁴⁷ There are excellent examples of how dialogical discourse has fruitfully progressed, including work done by ICON on creating their novice to expert framework.⁴⁸

Productive professional discourse

Another important question for the profession is where will it find the leadership for developing the field in higher education in the near future? It is unlikely that building a vision by describing what is done now, or was done in the past, will be the vision that supports leadership in a challenging and evolving climate. In a world where social, cultural and human values are under attack, and the cultural material that supports truth-seeking and truth-telling is considered dangerous, we must take care to describe the skills most needed by emerging conservators to build and strengthen the profession into the future.

Effective dialogical criticism needs to be framed by standpoint awareness. Critiques of conservation education require consideration of the context of the critique, the personal limitations or biases involved, and the professional responsibilities that are engaged with. For example, the UK's Institute of Conservation's Professional Standards require conservators to:

'6.6 Appreciate and be prepared to consider alternative, valid methods and approaches that are relevant to your practice.

6.10 Act responsibly and ethically in dealings with the public, employers, clients and colleagues.

6.14 Understand the limits of your own knowledge and abilities, and practise within them.'⁴⁹

Debate within the profession, especially with peers in a constructive environment, can lead to learning and growth. To help understand what this might entail in a discussion on conservation education, the authors offer the following points of interrogation. This checklist may help those entering the debate establish their own knowledge, limitations and contributions.

- How familiar are you with current conservation education content?
- Have you recently participated in conservation education update?
- Could your aim to improve the profession unintentionally contribute to problematic agendas such as the current 'culture wars' attack on education?
- Is your desire to strengthen the profession through a dialogue, or are you simply stating one view of how conservation should be practised?
- Do employers risk a conflict of interest by promoting course content that meets immediate workplace needs but limit graduates' broader professional growth?
- Does your contribution help support the sector to ensure graduate salaries that reflect their needs and demonstrate the value of higher education?
- If graduates only have entry-level skills, who will fund their subsequent skills development?

- Could your critique be misunderstood or misconstrued and cause distress to colleagues, emerging conservators or students?
- Is your critique focussed on method—such as best forms of assessment, or how to hardplaster an antelope—or outcomes—such as increasing the alignment of graduate attributes to emerging job opportunities in time-based media—and does the argument align to that objective?
- If you feel you have identified the correct leverage point, have you engaged with others to strengthen dialogue in ways that can most effectively achieve your outcomes?

In embracing the opportunities of the conservation discipline, we should constantly seek to forge new parameters. Conservators should have big dreams. If conservators are essential to a society that understands that keeping, sharing and passing on is fundamental to being human, then leadership of conservation is not about rehearsing practice but is about engaging with the great social questions. Critical conversations must be about what conservation *is*, not what it *does*; its values and its role, rather than its job and its tasks.

Taking as its point of departure the challenges of professional criticism, this article has touched on what the authors believe are many vital issues for the sector: how conservation education should be delivered, how the profession discusses practical skills without a singular agreed meaning, and how conservation teaching can survive in a neoliberal higher education market.

We argue for greater clarity in how we talk about conservation practice, taking care over terms like ‘hands on’ or ‘practice’. We note that preventive conservation, the conservation of digital components and the conservation of skills are all parts of conservation practice and that privileging some forms of practice over others is a choice, not a fundamental truth of conservation.

The tensions produced by current higher education funding levels cannot be solved from within conservation alone. They require institutional or broader societal change in how education is supported. Respondents to a conservation profession survey in the UK in 2019 identified funding advocacy and postgraduate training opportunities as the priorities to support conservation education.⁵⁰ Professionals and their professional bodies must decide how they intervene to shape outcomes of conservation teaching. We have argued above that many interventions can have the opposite effect from that which was intended. We have aimed to offer insight into the pressures and debates that are currently shaping the field, enabling readers to make their own choices as to how they engage in public and professional debates on the topic.

Conclusion

This article has emerged from a frustration with recent discussions that have arisen around conservation education. It is the result of many discussions with students, emerging conservators and fellow professionals around their responses and feelings when conservators publicly describe their education, or the education they are providing, as inadequate. Our standpoint is inevitably shaped by our geographical and cultural experiences, and we acknowledge that we cannot claim global relevance for these observations. However, we have offered examples from our experience and connected them to policy issues that others could interrogate for their own context. Where a critique of education relates to skills required in the mid- to late-twentieth century, it also fails to recognise the evolution of the conservation profession responding to new societal challenges with new skills. Conservation training that prioritises a core set of practical tasks based on past traditions, challenges and conceptions of what is lost, as opposed to what

50 Icon, *Icon Education Roundtable Debate*.

needs to be gained, fails to prepare students for the reality of the cultural heritage landscape in which they may reasonably aspire to find themselves.

In examining how discussions about conservation have unfolded across social media, peer-reviewed journals and within the profession, it became clear that issues arise when discourse is monological rather than dialogical. This *modus operandi* has the potential to lead to combative, or divisive, outcomes, that are at odds with useful professional discourse. As we discuss, this is a problem for conservation as a relatively small profession, working within the cultural and heritage industries that are, themselves, currently under attack. A good way to describe this is using the term 'friendly fire' where a well-intentioned volley may deliver unintended harm.

In seeking to understand how this harm might land we explored investment in conservation education, noting that the burden is on students and educational institutions to carry the cost of ensuring the future of the profession. As this cost sits within a complex and fragile economic environment, such investment is made even more significant. In examining the dynamic sites in which such critiques of conservation education sit it became clear that attacks on higher education sit within narratives of education disablement and anti-intellectualism, often with targets that are culturally and racially vilified.⁵¹ In this way, students may be undermined both by professional, and broader social discourse, with little ability, or opportunity, to defend themselves. Correctly identifying challenges is not synonymous with correctly identifying solutions. Whilst a direct link between a critique of courses and harm to students and the profession is unlikely to be quantitatively proven, nonetheless we believe this is a recognisable concern that professional conservators may wish to address.

Our analysis leads us to the question: Is this a useful debate? We conclude that dialogical criticism plays an important role in how disciplines inform professions and vice versa, however when discussions about conservation education take the form of monological discourse, such debate is ineffective.⁵² A stretched and challenged higher education sector is unlikely to nurture expensive courses if the profession shows such programmes its disdain. We have shown that higher education leaders take the lack of support from the sector to be a rationale for closure, rather than an impetus to increase funding. We call out the problematic nature of this form of discourse, particularly in its potential to create harm, and to give strength to broader attacks on the profession, on cultural value and identity, and on education. In response, we lay out the argument that conservation education needs to do more than nurture the skills that were part of the training of earlier generations. An education that is pluralist should decisively be leading the development of skills that will be needed for the next generation of conservators to fulfil their ambitions and contribute to the significant social and cultural issues of the future.

Statement on the use of AI

The authors have used both AI-powered Google Search and Microsoft 365 tools, including Copilot, to locate resources to identify correct formats for references, and to check spelling and grammar.

ORCID

Jane Henderson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3027-8452>

Robyn Sloggett  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7398-124X>

51 Cf. for example, Norma Marrun et al., 'Indifferent, (Un)Critical, and Anti-Intellectual: Framing How Teachers Grapple with Bans on Teaching Truth about Race and Racism, and Critical Race Theory', *Race Ethnicity and Education* 27, no. 1 (2024): 75–98, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13613324.2023.2203935>.

52 Catherine O'Connor and Sarah Michaels, 'When Is Dialogue "Dialogic?"', *Human Development* 50, no. 5 (2007): 275–85, <https://karger.com/hde/article-abstract/50/5/275/157337/When-Is-Dialogue-Dialogic?redirectedFrom=fulltext> (accessed 8 August 2026).

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Resumen

“Conservación de una estupa budista consagrada afectada por corrosión por azufre: un estudio de caso del Museo del Palacio Nacional de Taiwán”

Este estudio describe el proceso de toma de decisiones y el tratamiento de conservación aplicado a una Devavata stupa de cobre dorado, en la que se detectó una corrosión severa durante un inventario rutinario. Se identificaron compuestos de azufre superiores a 1600 ppm, provenientes de los materiales consagrados alojados en su interior, lo que indica la existencia de un entorno altamente corrosivo, probablemente responsable del deterioro de la estructura de cobre dorado. Análisis posteriores, que incluyeron técnicas de micro-XRF y pruebas Oddy, confirmaron la presencia de azufre y cloro, suscitando preocupación por su impacto tanto en el metal como en los materiales orgánicos circundantes. Estos hallazgos provocaron amplios debates entre los conservadores del museo y especialistas externos, así como entrevistas y consultas con autoridades religiosas tibetanas respecto a la manipulación y la posible apertura, extracción y almacenamiento de los materiales consagrados del interior de la stupa. Como resultado, y tras haber extraído los materiales consagrados y almacenado estos en recipientes herméticos libres de ácido, se decidió aplicar tioglicolato de etanolamina mediante un tratamiento localizado sobre los residuos de compuestos de azufre en la superficie dorada de la estupa. Este estudio de caso pone de relieve la necesidad de una toma de decisiones colaborativa que equilibre las consideraciones éticas con las prácticas científicas de conservación al tratar objetos religiosos, y ofrece un punto de referencia para iniciativas de preservación similares.

المخلص

الحوار بشأن تعليم الصون وانعكاساته على قطاع متغير يستكشف هذا المقال النقد الحواري بوصفه بنية منهجية في بناء خطاب تعليم الصون وتطويره وضبط معايير (calibration). كما يفحص المقال كلاً من الخطاب النقدي الضمني والصريح في مجال تعليم الصون، ومظاهر تجسد هذا الحوار، وآليات تفعيله، والغايات المرجوة منه. ثم يتناول المقال بالتحليل خصائص الخطاب النقدي المتعلق بتعليم الصون في ضوء المقتضيات المهنية والسياسية والاقتصادية التي تُوْطِر الاستجابات الموجهة لتعليم الصون بوجه خاص، وللتعليم العالي (tertiary education) بوجه عام. وفي الختام، يحلل المقال مآلات الحوار النقدي ودوره في تعزيز سمعة برامج تعليم الصون أو إضعافها. ويخلص إلى أن الخطاب النقدي في هذا المجال يحقق أقصى فائدة مرجوة منه عندما يُدار وفق أهداف واضحة؛ بما في ذلك تحديد أفضل السبل لرصد القطاع بأخصائيي صون ممارسين قادرين على التفكير التأملي، وتنمية المهارات الكفيلة بالاستجابة لمتطلبات قطاع حيوي ومتغير باستمرار.

Resumo

“O diálogo na educação em conservação e suas consequências para um setor em mudança”

Este artigo explora a crítica dialógica como um instrumento na construção, desenvolvimento e validação da educação em conservação. O estudo examina ambos os discursos críticos da educação em conservação, tácito e explícito, e como esse diálogo é manifestado, ativado e direcionado. As especificidades do discurso crítico em torno da educação em conservação são a seguir analisadas em relação às exigências profissionais, políticas e econômicas que formulam tais respostas para a educação em conservação (especificamente) e educação superior (mais amplamente). Por fim, a resolução do diálogo crítico e seu papel no fortalecimento ou na diminuição da reputação de programas de educação em conservação é analisada. O artigo conclui que discurso crítico em conservação é mais benéfico quando conduzido com objetivos claros, inclusive como melhor apoiar o desenvolvimento de conservadores profissionais reflexivos que podem desenvolver habilidades apropriadas para um setor vibrante e em transformação.

摘要

“文物保护教育对话及其对不断变化的行业的影响”

本文探讨了对话式批评作为一种参与文物保护教育的建设、发展与校准的机制。文章考察了文物保护教育中隐性的与显性的批判性话语，以及这种对话如何呈现、激活并发挥作用。随后，文章结合塑造此类回应的专业、政治和经济现实需求，分析了围绕文物保护教育（具体而言）及高等教育（更广泛而言）的批判性话语的具体细节。最后，文章分析了批判性对话的形成结果及其在提升或削弱文物保护教育项目声誉方面的作用。文章认为，只有在具有明确目标的情况下开展批判性文物保护话语，才能发挥最大效益。这些目标包括如何更好地支持反思型专业文物保护人员的发展，使其具备与蓬勃发展且日新月异的行业相匹配的技能。

Biographies

Jane Henderson is a Professor of Conservation and an Anna Plowden Medal winner. She is an expert on conservation of cultural heritage for the European standards body CEN TC 346 WG11 and serves as Chair of the BSI standard group B/560 concerned with the conservation of tangible cultural heritage. She sits on the council of the UK National Trust. She serves on the editorial panels of the *Journal of the Institute for Conservation* and the *Science Museum Group Journal*. She is the immediate past Secretary General of the International Institute for Conservation and past President of the Welsh Federation of Museums and Art Galleries.

Robyn Sloggett is Director of the Robert Cripps Institute for Cultural Conservation at the University of Melbourne and holds the Cripps Foundations Chair of Cultural Materials Conservation. Her most recent research includes advancing a framework for an Australian national conservation programme for both equity and graduate employment; examining climate change impacts on the preservation of cultural material in communities across Australia and the Asia-Pacific; and, in partnership with Indigenous researchers and communities, building conservation capacity for Indigenous community-held cultural heritage through qualifications and aligned employment opportunities. She is a Member of the Order of Australia. Her awards include the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) Medal, and the University of Melbourne Marles Medal recognising excellence in research impact.