

PART E AVAILABILITY OF SUITABLE CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION WORKERS IN AUSTRALIA

19.0 Interpretation of evidence from Parts B, C and D relating to the availability of suitable conservation and preservation workers in Australia

19.1 Background

As the Introduction to this report explained, the motivation to conduct the study derived from concerns about shortages of conservation and preservation workers in Australia, in terms both of their availability and their suitability, since announcement of the closure of the main conservator training course at the University of Canberra in 2002. Part E of this report focuses on these twin underlying concerns.

19.2 Availability of conservation / preservation workers

Conservation Survey 2006 shows that the collections sector is experiencing a shortage of conservation / preservation workers. This finding is based primarily on rates of readvertisement of positions, and is also supported by comments received.

Readvertisement is the strategy adopted when a position cannot be filled by the initial round of advertising and associated search strategies. Readvertisement of the same or similar position is often regarded as an option of last resort by employers. To save on the high cost of print advertisement and to reduce uncertainty when a first advertisement has not resulted in the appointment of a suitable candidate, employers typically examine many other ways of locating employees e.g. word of mouth recommendations, less expensive advertisement options, re-analysis of the need and timing of announcements. It has been suggested that normal rates of readvertisement are below 5%, but despite extensive research, a published reference to support this case has not been located.

Clear numerical evidence for 11 position readvertisements from a total of 102 advertised positions over the last three years means that the sector experienced a 10.7% rate of readvertisement of conservation / preservation positions (see Sections 8.8 and 8.16 of this report). If the figure of 133 advertised positions (from Likert scale responses at Question 7.1) is used, the rate of readvertisement is 8.27%.

The rate of readvertisement was reasonably even across the domains at one to two positions in each domain over the three year period. The median number of applications received per advertisement across the surveyed domains was 4.3. The range represented by this median is however very large: while some organisations received over 30 applications for some paraprofessional positions (particularly archives, libraries and hybrids containing archives or libraries), other organisations reported receiving zero, one or two applications for advertised conservator positions.

If the figure of 604 applications received over the last three years (see Section 8.8) is considered in conjunction with the 63% suitability to selection criteria (see Section 8.13), it can be suggested that the available job pool of suitable conservation and preservation workers in 2003-2005 was a maximum of 350 to 400 people. However, it may be assumed that a portion of the 623 conservation / preservation staff already employed (see Section 7.2) would have applied for the 102 to 133 advertised positions, and some may have applied for more than one position.

Some organisations commented that a lack in availability of suitably trained people forced them to engage insufficiently trained workers, and that this led to concerns that the standards in the organisation would be compromised. Although comments tended to confirm that standards had not yet been compromised, some employers are clearly uncomfortable with the staff choices they currently have to make. Other organisations cited difficulties in attracting workers to particular locations (interstate, remote or the inner or outer suburbs of Sydney), and that it was necessary to take on relatively inexperienced workers simply because of their willingness to move.

19.3 Suitability of applicants for advertised conservation / preservation positions

Proportions of applicants that are judged to broadly meet selection criteria at stage one in a recruitment process (i.e. based on written response and an interview) can be an indicator of the general suitability of the pool of applicants for a particular position. The median rate of 63% of candidates broadly meeting selection criteria across 136 advertised positions could be improved, but must be improved in archives where the suitability rate is only 25% (see Section 8.13). Interestingly, archives also reported the highest rate of appointment from external applicants at 89% (see Section 8.25).

19.3.1 Why were applicants judged unsuitable?

A leading reason for lack of suitability of applicants in the field of conservation / preservation is an applicant's area and degree of specialisation or skill. **Conservation Survey 2006** clearly shows that there is current and future demand for more professionals and paraprofessionals trained in particular traditional and emerging specialisations and skills.

Responses regarding requirements for particular specialisations and skills were given at many locations throughout the questionnaire, both in multiple choice and comment formats. The highest numbers of workers are required in areas where the item type is a 'carrier of information' e.g. book, film, sound recording, paper-based flat works / records. Thus collection maintenance, reformatting / copying, archival materials, paper – nonarchival, electronic media, audiovisual, books and photographs are commonly cited areas of need. Also, awareness about the value of managing whole collections through preventive conservation practice is represented by significant demand for this specialisation across the domains.

However, consistent requests were made by survey respondents for small to moderate numbers of conservation specialists in the following traditional areas: objects (general), paintings, buildings / architecture (including interiors), technological collections, textiles, furniture, ship models, natural history, metals, conservation science, conservation framing, large technology, archaeological objects and organic materials. There were also repeated indications that the role of conservation / preservation workers must extend further toward education of colleagues and clients.

Applicant specialisations and skills can be documented in formal qualifications. Information gathered in **Conservation Survey 2006** about the qualifications sought in conservation / preservation position advertisements over the last three years, shows that more Bachelor (62% up from 50% currently employed), VET Diploma and Trainees were sought than are currently employed, while there was a decrease in demand for Master, Graduate Diploma and VET Certificate level qualification. Interestingly, while 8% of the current workforce is employed on the basis of Experience (only), no employer sought an Experience (only) qualification in positions that were advertised in 2003-2005 (Sections 7.4 and 8.4).

Estimations for the next three years, however, show a dramatic shift away from emphasis on Bachelor-level training (35%) in two directions – primarily to more post-graduate but also to slightly more paraprofessional training (Section 14.4). The trend for 2006-2008 appears to be toward Graduate Diplomas and Certificates, then VET Certificates and Diplomas, and then Experience (only).

The figures for positions advertised 2003-2005 are very interesting because they seem to reflect traditional understandings of minimum qualifications in conservation in Australia (i.e. Bachelor-level qualification, typically from the University of Canberra). Perhaps employers were seeking to capture the last graduates from the University of Canberra Bachelor of Applied Science (Cultural Heritage Studies) in their job advertisements between 2003 and 2005. Nevertheless, employers appear to be adapting to the changing conservation / preservation training environment by seeking far fewer Bachelor-trained workers from 2006.

In conservation training, the shift to requiring post-graduate level qualification was foreshadowed with the introduction of the University of Western Sydney's Master / Graduate Diploma of Applied Science (Materials Conservation) in 1997. This course was established with reference to overseas standards. Post-graduate qualifications were subsequently emphasised at the University of Canberra from 2000 (from Bachelor to Master), and at the University of Melbourne from 2004, with the establishment of a new Master of Arts / Graduate Diploma in cultural materials conservation. The University of Melbourne course is currently the only course for professional conservation training in Australia.

In the TAFE system, Certificates I-IV, Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas in Museum Practice and Library / Information Services contain conservation components. Parts of these courses have been run each year since 1999 (revised in 2004) at varying locations around Australia. The Canberra TAFE (Canberra Institute of Technology) offered an individual training course for conservation paraprofessionals between 1992 and 1999, and is currently planning a new course at Associate Degree level. Conservation courses in Canberra are advantaged by co-location with most of Australia's national cultural institutions, so work placements can be readily arranged.

Appendix III presents more information on conservation and preservation education and training in Australia.

19.3.2 What makes the field of conservation / preservation unsuitable for applicants?

Contract work, especially for three months or less, suits a very small portion of the populace. Most people are committed to supporting ongoing family and accommodation costs, and therefore seek longer term work. Conservation and preservation workers have these same fundamental needs as any other part of the Australian community.

Contracts may particularly suit young workers who are seeking to accumulate a range of employment experiences for general career development, and to assist them in deciding which aspects of conservation / preservation suit them best for the future. However, it is clear that few young people are currently working in the field. In fact, this survey shows that only 11% of all currently employed conservation / preservation workers are under 30 years of age (Section 7.9).

The proportion of permanent conservation / preservation positions amongst currently employed workers between 2003 and 2005 was 75%. Amongst positions advertised between 2003 and 2005, this proportion was reported at 48% (Sections 7.6 and 8.5). Also, almost half of those currently employed are on contracts of three months or less (Section 7.7) whereas, between 2003 and 2005, longer term contracts were advertised (Section 8.6). The apparent move to longer term contracts is positive, but the apparent increase in the number of workers likely to be employed on contract is not favourable to employment stability in the sector.

The prevalence of contract employment in conservation / preservation is an obvious deterrent to potential employees and students. Contract employment has grown as ongoing collection work has been compartmentalised to fit with a project funding culture, which often favours exhibitions. Some survey comments suggest that pay levels are a deterrent, however this survey did not explore this issue.

Another deterrent to applicants is slow bureaucracies. On the data provided, **Conservation Survey 2006** showed that the median time taken to fill positions is six months (Section 8.20) – clearly too long for many applicants to wait. (It should be noted, however, that most of the 36 responding organisations felt that the rate of job filling was ‘about right’, both in the area of conservation / preservation and for their organisation generally (Sections 8.21 and 8.22). Also, conservation businesses find it difficult to stay operational because of standard tendering processes and standard, but long, payment periods for services rendered (typically 60 days).

Finally, the survey’s openness to receipt of comment attracted a number of requests for clear information on current training opportunities in conservation / preservation. As mentioned in Section 19.3.2, Appendix III contains a listing of contact points for courses derived from information provided to the Collections Council by professional organisations in the collections sector. In the future, this resource should be more fully developed to provide an accurate and comprehensive listing across the collecting domains.

There are currently serious disincentives to training and working in the conservation / preservation field, and this partly explains the lack of available and suitable conservation and preservation workers in Australia.