



The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material

Statement on Conservation Technicians/Assistants in an Australian Context, November 2015

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Purpose

This document aims to clarify the role of conservation technician/assistants in an Australian context. It highlights the relationship between technicians/assistants and conservators and describes a range of skills, knowledge and activities that conservation technicians/assistants may undertake in the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage.

Background

This document updates the 2005 *AICCM Definition of a Conservation Technician*. It draws heavily on key international resources such as the International Council of Museums - Committee for Conservation, *The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession Competencies (1984)* and *Conservation: Who, What & Why (2008)*¹, American Institute for Conservation, *Requisite Competencies for Conservation Technicians and Collection Care Specialists* and the Institute of Conservation, *Conservation Technician Qualification*.

It has been aligned to an Australian context, primarily via the frameworks provided by the national *Library, Information and Cultural Services Training Package (LISCTP)*, and the Public Service Board of New South Wales *Conservators, Cultural Institutions Agreement No. 2504 1987*. It has also been corroborated with current job descriptions from the South Australian and New South Wales Public Service.

Role: what a conservation technician/assistant does

There are numerous positions in Australian cultural institutions and private conservation settings that provide paraprofessional support for conservation activities. The positions have various titles, most commonly conservation technician or assistant conservator.

Conservation technicians/assistants perform or assist in coordinating operational activities required for the conservation and preservation of cultural materials.

¹ In 2008 ICOM-CC updated their now historic 1984 definitions document and developed an interactive model '*Conservation: who, what & why?*' to reflect that conservation work involves many players and stakeholders.

Typical activities may include one or more of the following: environmental monitoring, integrated pest management, disaster preparedness and response, collection housing, moving and storing collection materials, exhibition preparation, housekeeping and laboratory maintenance, labelling and documentation. As appropriate, technicians/assistants may be employed to undertake basic conservation treatments defined by the advice and direction of a conservator and specific to the specialisation of the technician². While technicians as a group perform a wide variety of activities, individual technicians may focus on a small number of activities, or in some cases, on a single activity³.

Technician positions are generally tailored to the specific needs of the organisation and focus on a particular area of conservation such as paper, textiles, objects, digital media, framing, large technology etc. Some positions require the technician/assistant to have training/experience in a related discipline (such as book restoration, engineering, art history, studio art or a trade), whereas others provide on-the-job training.

Autonomy, work levels, judgement and relationship to conservator

Conservation technicians/assistants generally work under the supervision and guidance of a professional conservator but operate with a degree of autonomy in their day to day activities⁴. For further information on a conservator's role, see *AICCM Statement on Conservators in an Australian Context, 2015*.

Senior conservation technicians may supervise other technicians within a team. Conservation technicians typically exercise judgment in dealing with a range of general or specialist tasks and problems with reference to established standards, practices and procedures. Some adaptation of systems, standards or practices may be undertaken in accordance with the level of the position and the experience and skills of the technician⁵.

In Australia, as well as in some overseas countries, the work level of a conservation technician/assistant may range from a basic skill level⁶, to an advanced level requiring a more highly developed skill set with higher levels of proficiency, expertise and autonomy⁷ and this range may occur within a single activity⁸.

² AIC p.2

³ AIC p.2

⁴ ICON

⁵ ALIA

⁶ NSW Public Service Assistant Conservator Class 1

⁷ South Australia (SA) Public Service Conservation Officer OPS3.

⁸ AIC p.11 and *ICON FAQ Progression Routes for Technicians*.

Knowledge and skills

The work of a conservation technician/assistant requires sound knowledge and skills which typically include an the following⁹:

Knowledge

- adherence to conservation ethics as outlined in the *AICCM Code of Ethics and Code of Practice (2002)*
- the role of conservation
- factors contributing to deterioration of cultural materials
- current conservation/preservation principles, including an awareness of issues that impact on moving, storing and preserving cultural materials
- cultural considerations and protocols for the handling, storage and display of collection material including those for indigenous materials
- the role of preventive conservation including environmental monitoring, integrated pest management (IPM), preventive care, housing and storage techniques, housekeeping, and disaster preparedness and response techniques
- risk assessment processes in relation to collections
- techniques for safe handling and examining collection materials
- work health and safety legislation and requirements
- awareness of the main issues relating to copyright, moral rights and intellectual property legislation

Skills

- manual dexterity and ability to handle delicate and fragile objects
- oral and written communication skills
- literacy and numeracy skills to interpret information and prepare records
- teamwork skills
- ability to analyse problems and formulate and implement suitable solutions
- good powers of observation, ability to think through processes with clarity of purpose
- ability to use relevant information technology to achieve work objectives.
- depending on the job requirements, more specialised knowledge and skills may be required.

⁹ AIC p. 5, LICSTP and SA Public Service Conservation Officer OPS2, OPS3

References

American Institute for the Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC) 2005, *Requisite Competencies for Conservation Technicians and Collection care specialists*, AIC, Washington.
<http://www.conservation-us.org/docs/default-source/governance/requisite-competencies-for-conservation-technicians-and-collection-care-specialists.pdf?sfvrsn=1>

Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) 2013, *Work Level Guidelines for Library and Information Services*. Library Technician Level 1
<http://www.alia.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/LIS%20Work%20Level%20Guidelines%2016052013.pdf>

Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM) 2002, *Code of Ethics and Code of Practice*

Institute of Conservation (ICON) 2014, *Conservation Technician Qualification* [note currently under review]. http://www.icon.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=753&Itemid=74

International Council of Museums - Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC), 2008, *Conservation: who, what & why?* <http://www.icom-cc.org/330/about-icom-cc/what-is-conservation/conservation:-who,-what-amp;-why/#.VD932ouUeYk>

International Council of Museums - Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) 1984, *The Conservator-Restorer: A Definition of the Profession Competencies*
http://www.icom-cc.org/47/history-of-icom-cc/definition-of-profession-1984/#.VOSDPUuH_7A. Note that this document is now part of ICOM-CC historical documents, and has been superseded by the interactive model *Conservation: who, what & why?* 2008.

Library, Information and Cultural Services Training Package (LICSTP) 2011, CUL11 Innovation & Business Skills Australia, Canberra

https://training.gov.au/TrainingComponentFiles/CUL11/CUL11_R1.0.pdf

See particularly CULSS00009 - *Preventive Preservation and Conservation Skill Set* (Release 1)
<http://training.gov.au/Training/Details/CULSS00009?tableUnits-orderBy=Code-desc>

NSW Public Service Assistant Conservator Class 1

Public Service Board of New South Wales Conservators, Cultural Institutions Agreement No. 2504 1987

South Australia (SA) Public Service Conservation Officer OPS 2 and OPS3