

What is the Value of an Archaeology Degree? Reply to Grant, Perring, Schadla-Hall and Shennan

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I would like to thank the editors of PIA for giving me the opportunity to air my feelings on this topic in a public forum and I would very much like to thank my esteemed colleagues who have considered and responded to the ideas that I floated.

Overall I must say that I am pleased and even surprised that the respondents have generally agreed with so much of what I have put forward, particularly regarding the issue of social inclusion (if not necessarily with my ideas for tackling the matter). This is something that archaeology has gingerly danced around and has not ever properly engaged with. Maybe the sector as a whole does not see it as a priority but while class-consciousness might no longer be a particularly fashionable idea, building a meritocratic and socially inclusive profession certainly is and I am very glad the respondents have concurred on this point.

I am interested in two further themes that I feel have come out of the comments. The first, most clearly expressed by Dominic Perring but also picked up by Jim Grant and Tim Schadla-Hall, is that archaeology is fun. I agree that it can be a really enjoyable subject to study and a good profession to work in. Intellectual stimulation and the sense of camaraderie that comes from the team-working aspects of archaeology do have real value in terms of quality of life and that is something to be encouraged and emphasised, but we should not see this as an alternative to financial remuneration. We need to make sure that all the stakeholders in our work (clients, politicians and the public) know that yes, archaeology is fun, but it is also important and archaeological practitioners should be rewarded intellectually, socially and financially for undertaking work that others value.

The second key theme is the credibility of qualifications. To paraphrase Perring, we are the experts, our work gives value to the past and we are made credible by our qualifications. Here I accept that long-established degree courses have particular value in terms of their credibility and that new courses and qualifications, such as the Qualification in Archaeological Practice or Foundation Degrees, will have to demonstrate their relevance in order to gain that credibility. This is not a problem, credibility is not something that is acquired overnight, it has to be built in order to be respected and these new courses will have to do that by showing that they deliver both relevant skills and solid understanding.

I feel I must disagree with Tim Schadla-Hall, however, when he argues that archaeology should not be the preserve of 'trained' archaeologists. He sees it as a public,

not an exclusive activity: to a degree, that is fair, the historic environment is a resource for all of society. However, some archaeological work is fundamentally destructive. Excavating a site is an unrepeatable experiment; once it is gone, it is gone and if we must do this then we have to do it to the absolute best of our capabilities. I think that means restricting the opportunity to carry out destructive work to specialists who are both capable and principled. The historic environment is a public resource but we are the experts who are charged with its care and interpretation and, to return to Perring, who give it value.

The UK government has signed and ratified the 1992 Valletta Convention (Council of Europe 1992) which is intended to “ensure that excavations and other potentially destructive techniques are carried out only by qualified, specially authorised persons” (Article 3.ii). Archaeology cannot go back on this; indeed, it is not up to the sector to decide what happens now but what we must achieve is agreement with government on what both “qualified” and “specially authorised” signify. I think this should mean that excavation has to become the preserve of the holders of credible qualifications who have demonstrated their commitment to ethical behaviour through their publicly accountable and peer-reviewed membership of a strong professional association. This is a measure of quality not a measure based upon whether a person earns their living from archaeological practice. It does not seek to exclude the unpaid ‘amateur’ but it does seek to shut out the ‘amateurish’.

Conclusions

Without knowing more about what archaeology graduates do or want to do with their degrees, it is extremely difficult for Higher Education providers to design courses that will maximise the benefits for their students.

A lot of reliance has been put on estimates of how many archaeology graduates go on to work in professional archaeology. These are only best-guess figures: what the sector doesn’t have is good, reliable destination data for archaeology graduates. Departments are asked to track their former students for the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education survey, as reported in Halpin (2005). That survey showed that, six months after graduation, many archaeology graduates may not be working in archaeology but it is unknown how many of them are still seeking to make a career in the profession. If we had better destination data we would be able to plan better for those who do ultimately end up working in archaeology.

However, those graduates who follow alternative paths and do not go on to become archaeologists can still benefit the profession. Stephen Shennan points out that we must recognise that not all students of archaeology will want to follow archaeological careers but that archaeology can gain from those graduates acting as advocates for the profession: “if there is a large pool of archaeology graduates out there in the world at large that understands archaeological values and influences public opinion in their favour.”

So to maximise this potential for graduates to become advocates for the sector, I agree wholeheartedly with Jim Grant when he calls for “publicising case studies of archaeol-

ogy students who have gone on to successful non-archaeological careers might be a good first step". Archaeology should emulate history, not for the first time, and the sector should produce a comparable publication to the Historical Association's Choosing History at 14, a DVD which "forms part of an awareness campaign launched by historians to show the remarkable number of history graduates who go on to become movers-and-shakers in modern-day Britain" (Manchester Metropolitan University 2005).

The consultation draft of the revised benchmark statement for archaeology degree courses (Quality Assurance Agency 2006) has recently been published. This draft has not greatly altered from the version adopted in 2000 but it does present a stronger emphasis on the ethical and professional context of the discipline, and has introduced welcome concepts such as employability and enterprise that were absent from the earlier document. These will enhance students' learning experiences and prepare them better for their working lives whether they choose to be archaeologists or not.

Epilogue

At the time of writing, in the autumn of 2006, there is a nationwide shortage of skilled excavators. Colleagues who work for commercial archaeological contractors around the UK say that recruitment is a real problem which is beginning to affect the kind of work they can do. There is so much archaeological work going on that contractors are risking over-reaching themselves and taking on projects that they cannot staff. This kind of situation has not happened since big infrastructure projects at the start of this decade (Heathrow Terminal 5, the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and then the Birmingham North Relief Road) involved the participation of so many fieldworkers that smaller projects elsewhere struggled to recruit staff. If this is a problem now, it is going to turn into a crisis very soon.

Fieldwork is getting underway at Stansted Airport in a scheme that has the potential to eclipse Terminal 5 as Britain's biggest ever archaeological project. The government's Sustainable Communities Plan aims to build 200 000 new homes in the south-east of England by 2016. This is going to lead to a lot of archaeological work and unless things change soon there is going to be a critical shortage of skilled people to carry it out. The government will not wait for us to catch up, those houses and runways will get built and the archaeology will be lost forever.

References

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