

## Comment on “What is the Value of an Archaeology Degree?”

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I have always believed that a first (undergraduate) degree course should teach, or develop, critical analytical faculties, no matter what the subject pursued. At the same time it should introduce the individual undergoing it to basic and often today absent skills, e.g. reading, paraphrasing, research. Above all it should ensure that it delivers both insights into the breadth and potential depth of the degree subject in at least one area and also inculcate values about communication and clarity. In addition it should expose the individual to the sources and nature of information and data on which the degree subject being studied is based. It should equip the individual with an ability to debate and argue coherently and logically both orally and in writing. Given that any well taught and well presented first degree course will affect any sentient human in terms of his or her aspirations and interests it should also provide scope for those undertaking it to be able to pursue it as a career or as an interest, and also to cease studying it if necessary. After all, the range of views and preconceptions about what constitutes a subject often requires correction.

I am clear that an undergraduate degree should not be boring, prescriptive or formulaic and that lectures for example should not deal with facts, which can be culled from any text book, but with ideas and should be a challenge and inspire. A first degree is in most cases about equipping people for a wider world and providing a springboard for future development.

An undergraduate degree, it follows from my views, is not vocational *sensu stricto* and certainly first degrees in archaeology should not be vocational. In my view it also follows, especially as archaeology (despite the best efforts of Don Henson and others) is still not widely taught in schools, that the challenge of both justifying and teaching a first degree in archaeology must be met.

The fact that archaeology is not widely taught in schools and history has always surprised me. I would argue that if well taught, and from an early age, archaeology provides considerable potential for developing a range of transferable skills, from simple maths right up to questioning the nature and presentation of evidence. It is also as many have previously pointed out (cf. Copeland 2004) ideally suited to a constructivist approach to education (Dhanjal 2005). It is surely no accident that the inspired and great educationalist Dewey (1916) suggested that children should start by learning pre-history rather than history. This leads me to the second strength of the subject: it acts as a generalised ear taking in information from an array of subjects and specialisms across the sciences and the humanities and allows access to areas from nuclear physics to art history, normally in an applied way.

Archaeology students do need to understand how we obtain our raw data, and for this reason any archaeology undergraduate degree must include exposure to the methods of collection of, and practices of analysis of, data. That means learning to excavate, record, analyse and interpret, together with the inherent and highly variable limitations of the processes involved. It also means gaining some insights into sorting and analysing collections and dealing with post-excavation. Here I believe the UCL Institute of Archaeology (IoA) fulfils its obligations better than most by insisting on 70 days' experience. However I do not believe it is possible to train every undergraduate to love trowelling and recording, although, that said, a well run excavation does have a range of roles and activities that will accommodate most skills and interests.

When I read archaeology there was no requirement to undertake fieldwork at all – but most of my contemporaries had already got extensive field experience before university and continued subsequently. One of the problems today is being able to give students sufficient field experience simply because many excavations and field projects exclude school age children and older people from volunteer work. One of the best field archaeologists I know, who has an honorary doctorate, never went to university and despite a string of important publications which would be the envy of many academic colleagues was entirely self taught.

A survey by one of the IoA undergraduates in 2002 demonstrated that the number of undergraduates who wanted to pursue a career in field archaeology fell from 70% in year one to under 20% in year three (Holly Cork, pers. comm.). In other words many were not likely to pursue archaeology as a career, and certainly not in field archaeology, but they were still committed to completing their degrees. Over the years I know of students who have gone into merchant banking, media, the armed forces, teaching, public administration, the theatre, the law and even marketing. Many of them have continued their interests in archaeology and also managed to earn a reasonable income outside the archaeological profession. I hope and assume – because it is difficult to prove this except anecdotally – that the qualities of their undergraduate degree did equip them with the skills that I outlined above.

There are currently at least 40 UK universities offering undergraduate degrees in archaeology, and in a competitive, market-driven environment they need to ensure that they can supply what the customer wants rather than what they choose to provide, otherwise they will eventually have to close down. If they do not offer a realistic exposure to field archaeological work already then they should close down immediately! It is worth making the point that for me field archaeology is about a lot more than learning about excavation or even field walking.

That said, university departments should not be the only places where it is possible to learn about the processes and activity of field archaeology. Until the 1980s it was possible for anyone with an interest in archaeology to learn about and develop skills in archaeological fieldwork as a volunteer, and from quite an early age, but the advent of PPG 16 (Planning Policy Guidance: Note Number 16) requirements has to a large degree precluded many of these opportunities. Here is not the place to argue that ar-

archaeological skills are not the exclusive preserve of university graduates, indeed much of the most interesting work and results in British archaeology have resulted from the work of part-timers or amateurs.

One of the problems created by the creation of commercial archaeology and PPG 16 and the absorption of archaeology into the planning and development process is the drive towards certification and paper standards, driven by the identification of competences, which in turn has resulted from the professionalisation of an activity that should not be exclusively the preserve of 'trained' archaeologists; archaeology is a public, not an exclusive, activity. The possession of a university degree in archaeology is not necessarily a certificate in competence in field archaeology; in some cases it certainly is, but in others it might not be.

Unfortunately I never considered that an undergraduate degree was a form of investment. I just wanted to learn and enjoy the activity of learning, and archaeology, mainly through field work, was something that I had spent time doing long before I went to university. I did not consider what would happen to me when I finished my first degree even though I finished in debt, mainly because of my unpaid bar bill. I did not consider a career in archaeology before I went to university – in fact I did not consider a career at all until I had been at university for three years.

So how would I conclude? I have offered what I consider to be the purposes and nature of a first undergraduate degree at the outset: I would measure the quality of any archaeology degree against those and I am sure that some would be found wanting. It is clear that archaeology degrees provide access to a wide range of possible careers, including some which will mean continuing into a career in field archaeology. Any university archaeology department that expects to survive in an increasingly commercially dominated world does need to recognise the current climate and take cognisance of the future as well. It follows from this that some relevant training in field techniques is important, and should be incorporated into any course, and that it should also take into account what the commercial sector seeks. At the same time this element must be accompanied by teaching and developing all those other skills; and these must include analysis and debate. None of this is easy in a climate in which it seems to me, in many places, courses are being made simpler and more digestible, whilst our subject becomes increasingly complex and diverse. I just hope that those responsible for delivering archaeology degrees recognise that they need to constantly change and improve their product to meet both market requirements and inevitably changing potential customer requirements without diluting the requirements of an undergraduate degree that I outlined in my opening paragraphs.

### References

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