

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

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I agree with virtually all the points made in Kenneth Aitchison’s analysis of the role of an archaeological degree, the relationship between the archaeological degree and the archaeological profession and also with his desires for the future, so in that sense there is not much for me to discuss. However, I am a bit less convinced about his proposals for achieving the ends that he (and I) would like to see. It also seems to me that his analysis of the situation leads to rather ambivalent conclusions, on the one hand emphasising the value of the general dimensions of an archaeology degree, on the other urging a greater emphasis on archaeological employability.

I agree with what he says a good archaeology degree should deliver and the importance of transferable skills. I do not think we need to see the latter in the rather denigrating way expressed by the quote from John Hunter. I think Aitchison’s own characterisation of the situation is exactly right:

When they complete their degrees, all of those graduates should be able to demonstrate the skills that will enable them to work in graduate-level jobs. A good archaeology degree should deliver that high level expertise and transferable skills in the context of also establishing a firm level of understanding about the physical traces left by human lives in the past. It should be both about aspiring to understand those human lives (academic skills and knowledge) and about how to retrieve and interpret those physical traces (vocational skills and knowledge).

His analysis of the individual, corporate and public values of an archaeology degree is acute and illuminating. It is when he turns to his recommendations that I become less convinced. He cites Collis’s assessment that only 15% of archaeology graduates go on to seek a career in archaeology. As he says, this has been the basis of the non-delivery of strongly vocational degree courses by universities. He then cites a study suggesting that 60% of students would like to do so but are unable to realise their ambitions and suggests that course designers should be working to change this. Even assuming that degree courses could and should be made more relevant to professional practice in this way, it is not clear that it will lead to a greater than 15% success rate in those who achieve their aim. This is going to be ultimately determined by the relation between the number of graduates competing for positions and the number of positions available. All that increasing the professional element would do is to raise the baseline of the competition for professional positions, quite possibly at the expense of the broader generic skills elements that the author rightly praises elsewhere. Moreover, it is still likely that those who go on to do a vocational Master’s qualification would do better

in that competition, thus putting the pressure on others to follow the same route. It is already apparent from his figures that they do better in income terms.

I completely agree with him that vocational skills should not be completely neglected at undergraduate level but at the UCL Institute of Archaeology (IoA) that certainly does not occur, nor is it ever likely to in my view. The situation may be different at other universities, and that certainly emphasises the importance of people looking very carefully before they choose a degree. However, I don't see the threat to the profession that he envisages from failure to teach and learn vocational skills at the undergraduate level. If there is a threat it is far more likely to come from the generally low level of archaeological salaries outside universities.

In fact, what he goes on to say seems to contradict the previous emphasis on the importance of the vocational dimension. He rightly points out that the research design, analysis and presentation skills relevant to academia are vital for graduate level jobs anywhere. He is equally correct to point out that the complaints of archaeological employers are echoed by graduate employers across the board and are equally misplaced. As he says,

The mistake (archaeological) employers often make is in assuming that technical skills are what they want from their workforce, when it is in fact the generic, transferable skills and the ability to learn the technical expertise that will make a person a valued employee.... It is these transferable skills that universities must recognise that they are delivering and they should aim to improve the quality of this skill delivery.

Maybe other archaeology undergraduate degree programmes do not provide this. It seems to me that the UCL IoA at least does quite a good job of responding to these needs already although we are always examining and modifying what we do in response to student feedback, to our own sense of what needs changing and to outside pressures of various kinds. Equally though, this does not stop us from offering a very wide range of Master's courses, many of them vocational, which we believe will make people better qualified to enter the profession.

I agree with his concern about social exclusion but I am sceptical about his advocacy of archaeology foundation degrees as a way of overcoming this. It seems to me that they will not necessarily provide the high-level generic skills that he has emphasised earlier but rather lower-level technical ones. Moreover, he has already demonstrated the link between educational level and income so the danger would be that we would simply have another lower income layer within the archaeological profession. Likewise, I have some doubt about the impact of the Qualification in Archaeological Practice. Not that there is anything wrong with it in itself. However, if it is for people in jobs, it is in effect for people in the exclusive category already who have got that far. If it is something that gives credit to things people already do as part of an archaeological education and vocational Master's courses are certainly part of this, then I am not clear how it makes much difference.

The issue of social exclusion is a much broader one, related in Britain to lower levels of social mobility generally in recent decades. However, much of it in my view relates to salary levels. If people from all sorts of backgrounds thought that archaeology was a worthwhile career financially they would be prepared to make financial sacrifices at the start of their career in order to enter. On the other hand, while some of those from middle class backgrounds who go into the profession may be subsidised through their education by parents who can afford it, the vast majority do not have significant subsidies thereafter. They go into it accepting that they will not earn large amounts of money but with a set of values that regards this as less important than other aspects of life. Maybe this is one of the factors keeping down archaeology salary levels?

In conclusion, I entirely concur with the assessment of the value of an archaeology degree. I am not convinced about the issue of restricted employability, unless most university archaeology degrees in Britain are very different from those at UCL, which I doubt given the subject benchmark statement. I agree absolutely that the social mix of those who do archaeology degrees and enter the archaeology profession needs to be broadened and the Institute is heavily involved in the kind of Widening Participation activities that are trying to achieve this over the long term. I am also strongly in favour of increased professional archaeology salaries. Ironically perhaps, a combination of a broader entry and higher salaries, producing a more genuine meritocracy, would almost certainly have the effect of increasing the degree of competition for the jobs available, leading to a still greater edge for those with further qualifications such as Master's degrees and a greater than ever need to recognise that only a small minority of graduates will go into the profession. This should not be seen as a problem. There is a far greater likelihood of the profession improving its credibility, standing, number of jobs and salaries 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.