

## FORUM

### What is the Value of an Archaeology Degree?

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#### Introduction

A few summers ago, I arranged for a friend and I to spend a day at the St Leonard's Hospital excavation in York, a project where interested members of the public could get some experience of what it is like to work on a dig. My friend had never been on a working archaeological site before and under the supervision of York Archaeological Trust staff we spent the day patiently trowelling and brushing, turning up occasional sherds as we went. When we finished I asked whether she had enjoyed herself. Oh yes, she thought it had been interesting but, she asked, why do you need a degree to do that?

Archaeology has long held a reputation for delivering great intellectual stimulation but poor financial rewards and until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century there was no real potential to earn a living from archaeology in the UK. In this paper I will argue, from a personal capacity, that archaeology is now a profession that needs skilled and knowledgeable practitioners at graduate level and that an overwhelming advantage to anyone wishing to work in the profession is gained by starting the accumulation of those skills and knowledge through studying for a degree in archaeology.

While there is more to value than money, this paper will focus on the bottom line of earnings and employment, particularly within professional archaeology, as it aims to examine the value of a degree in archaeology to individual practitioners, to the business of archaeology and to the public.

Archaeology is unusual in that, like history or English literature but unlike most other academic disciplines, it attracts a massive level of public interest that goes far beyond the numbers of people studying the subject or working in the profession. However, the popular view of archaeologists is that we all work in a highly academic environment, whereas in reality only 10% of professional archaeologists work for universities teaching and carrying out research (Aitchison and Edwards 2003: 20, table 15). While academia is the highest paid sector within archaeology (ibid: 41, table 54), many members of the public do not realise that commercial or public sector archaeology even exist and so they certainly do not realise that low pay is a big issue in the archaeological profession.

In 2002-2003, the average salary for all archaeologists was £19 161, which compared poorly with the national average full-time salary for all occupations of £24 498 (ibid: 39). There are also relatively few career opportunities for archaeologists. It is a very small profession, with only 5700 people working in archaeology in 2002-2003 (ibid: 19) and a very large pool of potential entrants to professional archaeology, 11 755

students were enrolled on archaeology degree courses in 2003-2004 (Ramsden 2005), but universities have not focused degree content on turning students into professional archaeologists. With such an imbalance between the numbers of paid practitioners and students, it would not be realistic to do so.

However, 90% of working archaeologists are graduates and nearly everyone now entering work in archaeology has a degree, in fact 98% of archaeologists aged in their 20s do so (Aitchison and Edwards 2003: 37, table 48). With a current oversupply of graduates chasing a limited number of vacancies, non-graduates have little chance of getting entry-level jobs as there is an absence of any other competence- or knowledge-based criteria for employers to use when sifting applications from candidates.

In summary: archaeology is presently a small and underpaid profession. In the absence of defined career paths, a degree in archaeology has very nearly become the prerequisite for anyone wanting to follow a career within it.

### **What Makes a Good Degree?**

This writer considers that by getting a degree a person should be able to acquire and keep a graduate-level job. This is defined by Purcell and Elias (2004: 9) as a job which “requires some combination of expertise deriving from higher education, and the ability to demonstrate strategic/managerial skills or high-level interactive skills”.

As already mentioned, in the academic year 2003-2004, 11 775 students were enrolled on (rather than starting in that year) UK undergraduate or postgraduate degrees in archaeology (Ramsden 2005). These are the most recent figures available that show there has been a remarkable and rapid growth in student numbers over the past decade, from 6690 students in 1999-2000 (Ramsden and Brown 2002) and a base of 3496 in 1994-1995 (Ramsden 2005).

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).

### **The Personal Value of an Archaeology Degree**

Currently, archaeologists are poorly rewarded for their work. A widely publicised set of figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education 2002-2003 survey, published in Halpin (2005), showed archaeology graduates as being extremely badly paid, the least well paid of 61 subject areas compared in that study. Those figures demonstrated that archaeology graduates typically take up very poorly rewarded first jobs, whether they are working in archaeology or not, as those figures relate to graduate earnings six months after graduation rather than to overall earnings in each particular subject area.

If those graduates do go on to work in archaeology, they find that archaeologists are indeed not well paid, salaries are well below the national average. However, it has also been established that without a degree it is extremely hard to get a job in archaeology. Although, while it is now practically the *de facto* entry-level qualification for archaeology, it must also be noted that simply holding an academic degree increases a person's earning ability and this will benefit all archaeology graduates whether they work within the discipline or not. The graduate earnings premium, the additional amount paid by employers to those that have a degree which is the employer's valuation of the extra skills and knowledge that a graduate can bring to a job, is measurable on appointment and increases with age and experience. By age 35-37 it typically represents a financial advantage of 30% of earnings over non-graduates (Purcell and Elias 2004: 11). O'Leary and Sloane (2005) used regression analysis to estimate that female graduates earn on average £157 982 more over their working lives than non-graduates, while male graduates earn an average of £141 539 more.

For those that do work in the archaeological profession, having a degree does indeed present a financial advantage. Using the figures given in Aitchison and Edwards (2003: 37, table 49) it can be calculated that, on average, graduate archaeologists earn 26% more than their (typically older) non-graduate colleagues, many of whom entered the profession via the Manpower Services Commission route in the 1980s. This is a comparable premium to that calculated by Purcell and Elias for all areas of employment.

Furthermore, while it can be shown that graduates working in archaeology earn more than non-graduates, the higher the level of academic qualifications held, the higher a person's earning potential is. Table 49 of Aitchison and Edwards (2003) sets out average archaeological salaries (for 2002-2003) by highest levels of qualification achieved:

Secondary education	£15,132
Undergraduate degree	£18,835
Masters degree	£21,198
Doctorate	£27,222

**Table 1:** Average archaeological salaries for 2002-2003 (after Aitchison and Edwards 2003: 37, table 49)

So in terms of financial value to the individual archaeologist, holding a degree is currently a great advantage in terms of being able to enter work in professional archaeology at all, and the higher the level of academic qualifications held, the more a person will typically earn.

#### **The Corporate Value of a Degree in Archaeology**

Archaeology has very rapidly become very big business. This author estimated that a total of £119m was spent on funding all the sectors of professional archaeology in England during 1999-2000 (Aitchison 2000). Applying the same methodology to updated data, I would now calculate that £213m was spent on funding archaeology in England

in 2003-2004, an increase of 79% over four years (Hinton and Jennings forthcoming). That is a phenomenal and ongoing rate of growth. These are boom times for archaeology: the 1990-1991 estimate was of £31m being spent (Spoerry 1992), which had increased rapidly from the earliest figure available of £4m in 1976-1977 (Dennis 1979).

With 90% of the people doing that work being graduates, the value of degrees in archaeology to the archaeological profession can be quantified in terms of hundreds of millions of pounds. This also stresses the value to the profession of a continuing stream of skilled and knowledgeable new entrants showing that degrees have very real value to archaeological employers.

### **The Public Value of a Degree in Archaeology**

It is a truism to say that public value reflects what the public values (Blaug, Horner and Lekhi 2006: 23) and it can be objectively demonstrated that the public values the historic environment. The headline figures generated by the Market and Opinion Research International (MORI) survey of attitudes to the historic environment (2000) included:

- 88% [of people surveyed] think it is important in creating jobs and boosting the economy
- 87% think it is important in the cultural life of the community
- 76% think their lives are richer for the opportunity to visit or see it

So clearly the historic environment, and archaeology as a key component of that, has public value. However, it cannot maintain its value indefinitely if it is left in a vacuum, it needs to be managed by skilled and qualified professionals, i.e. people with graduate-level jobs. Some of those people must be archaeologists and as shown above, it is a great advantage to those archaeologists to hold degrees in order to work in those roles. Therefore the public values archaeology degrees as it values archaeology graduates who care for the historic environment.

### **Challenges Facing Archaeology**

This writer sees the biggest current challenge to the archaeological profession and to university archaeology departments in particular being to enhance the value of those degrees by becoming more focused on the needs of existing and potential future students, career entrants and current practitioners. The two key areas where those needs have to be addressed are through maximising the employability of individuals and by making archaeology a more socially inclusive discipline.

Universities have been slow to respond to these needs. Focus on Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) scores in order to maintain funding levels has meant relatively little innovation at undergraduate level, although the primary aim of delivering quality education so that students can leave university with good degrees has remained unchanged.

Historically, undergraduate degrees in archaeology have not prepared students to become professional archaeologists. More than 30 years ago, John Bishop wrote: "Most

university first degree courses are not a training for the field archaeologist. They are academic education and not vocational training” (1975: 11). What was true in the 1970s still holds true today. John Hunter, Professor of Ancient History and Archaeology at the University of Birmingham, has said (pers. comm.) that he considers that an undergraduate “degree is just a rite of passage and that the subject studied has become little more than a vehicle for teaching transferable skills”. I would argue that it is those transferable skills that are actually more important for graduates’ career development whether they want to work in archaeology or not.

### **Employability**

Considering the challenge of employability, Collis (2001) estimated that 15% of archaeology graduates go on to seek a career in archaeology and without detailed destination data that has remained the accepted benchmark. This figure has been used to justify the non-delivery of particularly vocational undergraduate degree courses as such content would not be valuable to the overwhelming majority of students. Because occupational skills are not delivered at the undergraduate level, increasing numbers of specialised taught Master’s courses have been introduced that do address particular vocational areas. However, Brennan, Cobb and Croucher (2006) have since presented an estimate that 75% of undergraduates are interested in following a career in archaeology. So to address student needs, course convenors and designers should realistically be thinking around the idea that 25% of students do not want to use their degree to further an archaeological career, 60% want to but are then stymied in their ambitions and 15% do manage to follow that path.

Not all degree courses can be, or should be, the same. With over 30 university departments of archaeology in the UK delivering undergraduate degrees, diversity of course content is valuable in order to maintain vibrancy within the academic discipline and to ensure there are graduates with a wide range of abilities, skills and knowledge who are able to enter the workforce. The QAA benchmark statement for archaeology recognises that “degree programmes will be located at different points within a triangle drawn between the complementary archaeologies of the humanities, sciences, and professional practice” (Quality Assurance Agency 2000: 5). Realistically, no course should be located at any of the vertices of the QAA triangle, all undergraduate degree courses should incorporate elements of all three aspects; but without a strong vocational component, there will be no support for the future professional development of archaeological practice. If the teaching and learning of vocational skills are completely neglected at undergraduate level, then these skills will either have to be acquired through postgraduate education or in the workplace; or the number of people who are capable of retrieving the primary data upon which all other archaeological enquiry and interpretation ultimately rests will decline, impacting negatively on the profession as a whole.

Furthermore, given that only 10% of professional archaeologists carry out research and teach at universities (Aitchison and Edwards 2003: 20, table 15), it is unrealistic to design degree courses purely as foundations for future academic careers. However, the skills involved in designing research projects, critical analysis and the presentation of results, which are all essential for those seeking to continue in academia, are also the

most valuable high-level generic skills for students who will then be seeking to take up graduate-level jobs whether within or outside academia.

I have previously written about archaeological employers' long-standing complaints that university graduates are not ideally suited to enter the workforce (Aitchison 2004: 23-24). However, this is a universal complaint: all employers who seek the perfect person to fill precisely the gap they have in their workforce will be disappointed (Yorke 2006). What employers should aspire to find are employable graduates who are able to learn what their employer needs and can adapt themselves to the working situation they then find themselves in.

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. "What archaeology needs more than anything is team players who are leaders, people with multidisciplinary expertise, a sense of humour, and the ability to be versatile" (Fagan 2006). It is these transferable skills that universities must recognise they are delivering and they should aim to improve the quality of this skill delivery.

### **Social Inclusion**

Regarding the second issue I see facing the universities and the profession as a whole: archaeology is not socially diverse. It "can be seen as a white, middle-class dominated profession with limited lower socioeconomic group engagement" (Aitchison and Giles 2006: 7); this statement is supported by research carried out by Benjamin (2003) who found that only 2% of archaeology undergraduates are black or Asian. Aitchison and Edwards (2003: 25) found that more than 99% of the people working in archaeology are white. That study also found that less than 1% of professional archaeologists are disabled.

If archaeology remains low-paid, with an oversupply of graduates seeking entrance, then "the potential for archaeology becoming a profession stocked solely by practitioners from affluent middle-class backgrounds is magnified by unpaid or poorly paid work placements, sometimes grandly called internships, as a route into work" (Aitchison 2004: 215), as only the relatively wealthy will be able to maintain themselves in following such a career path. Volunteering is often an option that is open only to the rich and encouraging this as a strategy for new professional entrants denies equality of opportunity to some who cannot take this as a route to launch their careers.

With limited opportunities and socially exclusive routes to entry, archaeology is not a meritocratic subject to study or profession to work within. Potentially, some of the best people are not able to rise to the top. Alternative entry routes need to be found or developed or the profession as a whole will become a caricature of itself, regressing backwards towards the days of the 'gentleman amateur'.

Foundation degrees may be one of the ways in which participation in archaeology can be broadened, while simultaneously enhancing the employability of students. These

are two-year courses which require less of a financial commitment from learners and which have different entry requirements from traditional academic degrees. They are intended to be vocationally relevant, with enhanced employability a key principle in course design.

At the time of writing, Bournemouth University is the only provider of foundation degrees in archaeology. That course has been deliberately designed to create “skills rich students ready for employment” (Welham forthcoming). It can be anticipated that more foundation degrees will be established as other Higher Education institutions appreciate their value to potential students.

Another alternative way forward will come from the Archaeology Training Forum’s decision to develop vocational qualifications. This Qualification in Archaeological Practice (QAP) is not intended to replace academic qualifications as it will be entirely about competence in the working situations rather than about the intellectual understanding of life in the past. This new set of qualifications is intended to complement degree courses while enhancing the employability of those that hold them: they will be a mechanism for proving competence and capability. The qualification will be based on the accumulation and assessment of evidence gathered in the workplace and so, initially at least, it will primarily be aimed at people who are already in work. However, there is great potential for the training that leads to these qualifications to become combined with an academic education, so giving students who are particularly minded towards a career in archaeology the chance to gain double qualifications over the same period of study.

It is hoped that candidates will be able to begin enrolment on the QAP in 2006-2007. This has potential to be the driving force that delivers an archaeological workforce that can demonstrate its competence as well as its intellectual achievement, which would then be an argument that can be used to justify financial rewards that are appropriate for skilled professionals. Any such achievement must remain in the future, perhaps half a working generation away, but the work has begun.

### **Conclusions**

In response to the question my friend asked: why do you need a degree to ‘do’ archaeology – I initially blustered about encyclopaedic academic knowledge and the necessity of having a broad understanding of the past. On reflection, I now accept that you do not need a degree to be able to dig but I do consider that you should have one to be able to fully plan and run a complex excavation project through all of its stages from preparing the research design to fieldwork and on to report-writing and delivering the archive. You should have a degree to carry out full post-excavation analysis on the materials that have come from such a project and you should have a degree to understand how to manage archaeology as an environmental resource while handling the competing demands of different stakeholders in that resource. Having a degree gives an overwhelming advantage to anyone wanting to get a job being paid to play those roles and the many others within the profession of archaeology.

Ultimately, degrees in archaeology are valuable to the public, to the profession, and to

individual archaeologists. They will gain in value in the future if the challenges facing the profession and the universities of restricted employability and a narrow social mix can be successfully addressed, leading to more able and better-rewarded archaeologists working in a successfully meritocratic profession that delivers enhanced public appreciation, enjoyment and engagement with the past.

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