Comment on "What is the Value of an Archaeology Degree?"

Dominic Perring
Director of the Centre for Applied Archaeology and Archaeology South-East
UCL Institute of Archaeology

Further to the many excellent points made in Kenny Aitchison's review, I would like to make the fairly obvious one that studying archaeology is fun. For many this will be the main value of taking a degree in the subject. It combines challenging theory with hard science, doing with thinking and the thrill of individual discovery with all of the social advantages of team working. If it were not fun it would attract fewer students and we would not have to worry about the problems of converting enthusiasm into employment. Our problem is that whilst a degree in archaeology is valuable to do, it is not necessarily valuable to have.

If you want a career in archaeology a degree in the subject is, however, invaluable. It may not teach you how to be an archaeologist but it offers initiation into the language and landscape of the subject. It sets out a route map through the academic and professional worlds, shows how the bits fit together (or do not) and puts distant horizons to ambition. Taking a degree involves developing networks of contacts, finding opportunities to get involved in projects and laying the foundations for acquiring specialist credentials. It may be possible to get a job in archaeology without a degree but it is difficult to forge a successful career without one.

Most archaeologists are employed in Cultural Resource Management (CRM), the business of reconciling modern uses of the environment with its perceived historical-cultural value, where they are relied upon to provide authoritative expert advice based on scientific knowledge (Smith 2004). Those who give value to the past and hold in balance decisions as to whether to ignore, excavate or preserve our archaeological sites and monuments are made credible as experts by their academic qualifications. A degree is necessary, at the very least, if an archaeologist is to be taken seriously by non-archaeologists. It is therefore somewhat ironic that a fault-line has opened up between the (largely) 'post-processual' learning that leads to academic qualification and the (almost entirely) 'processual' practice required of thus qualified professional archaeologists. We are not preached what we will be expected to practice.

One of the difficulties faced by graduates, which devalues many degrees in archaeology, is that what is good for an archaeological career is not good for getting a first job. Most entry-level recruitment occurs when archaeological contractors advertise for temporary field staff in response to an unexpected flurry of work. Field staff taken on at short notice need advanced technical skills in order to meet the tight deadlines required by clients and the high standards expected by curators. This is not a situation in which

training can easily be offered. The short term circumstances of so much employment in contract archaeology make it difficult to take a long term view on staff development or to take risks with inexperience. However, field archaeology is a craft: it has to be learnt in the doing, guided by people who have already mastered the craft. This creates a catch-22 situation in which those seeking archaeological employment cannot find a job without skills but cannot acquire skills without a job. This does not mean that employers do not also want staff with the generic transferable skills that come with a university degree. They want both. The reality, though, is that in many cases the ideal new recruit has relevant experience, lives opposite the site and can start work tomorrow. The degree can sometimes seem an optional extra.

This highlights another aspect of the fault-line between academic and commercial archaeology: universities do not teach the craft-skills required on commercial projects. As Aitchison explains, this is not the purpose of a first degree and I think it would be irresponsible to abandon teaching broad transferable skills in order to concentrate on teaching narrow technical competencies for which there is a limited market. Vocational training is better obtained through working on archaeological projects with an element of training supervision. Aitchison describes some of the options available, although I suspect that the Qualification in Archaeological Practice will not help recent graduates: its value lies in its potential to add to the professional status of those already in employment.

In order to close the gap between what universities teach and employers require, we need to create more opportunities for prospective archaeologists to develop appropriate skills before they start looking for work. This means supporting more projects that can accommodate inexperienced and apprentice workers: volunteers, interns, students, work experience and so on. There is considerable scope for opening up the archaeological work place to students at various stages in their development, especially within the context of Master's degrees with a work-placement component. Aitchison is uncomfortable with the way in which these ways of developing professional skills favour those who can afford to commit time to unpaid work and study, since this is likely to reinforce the middle class bias of the profession. However, the very structure of CRM archaeology, with its emphasis on professional expertise and qualification, is middle-class in character and limits opportunities for community involvement. An archaeology of doing, of participation and discovery, can open the door to many who feel excluded by a profession increasingly jealous of its expert status, and where more effort is invested in managing resources than in enjoying archaeology for the experience it gives us (Holtorf 2005).

As should now be clear, there are significant differences between the way in which archaeology is taught within universities and the way it is practiced in the commercial world. If students were made more aware of these differences and given clearer career guidance it might reduce the scope for eventual disappointment.

There are also many ways in which we could improve the employment prospects of archaeology graduates. Commercial archaeology depends on expert skills but has failed

to invest in developing those skills or properly rewarding them. I suspect (and hope) that this is not sustainable and that future changes in the way in which we do archaeology (especially in our handling of digital data) will require employers to spend more on staff development. This is likely to make archaeology more expensive. If our clients cannot afford to pay more then this may mean that we will have to be more selective about what we do. I would welcome a world in which we worked on fewer projects but did so in pursuit of more ambitious research goals. This would add to the intellectual rewards of archaeological employment. I would also like to imagine, although this may be wishful thinking, that if professional archaeologists were better trained and more expensive to employ, then archaeological qualifications would eventually be accorded higher status by other employers.

So I look to improve the value of an archaeology degree by accepting the fact that we are already heading in two opposite directions. As a consequence of this we need to be both narrower and broader in our teaching objectives (and clearer to our students about the differences involved). I propose a smaller and more highly skilled professional sector in which the first degree is but a small part of an education that is both academic and technical. Nevertheless, we should also support and welcome the wider world of interest by being less precious about the resource (i.e. digging more and letting more people in on the fun) and by recognising that a degree in archaeology is not vocational but a rewarding subject of study in its own right.

Whether or not these hopes are realised archaeology is unlikely to offer a secure route to remunerative employment for all but a few. The main justification for both doing and studying archaeology is because it is challenging and fun. That is its real value.

References

Holtorf, C. 2005. *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas. Archaeology as popular culture*. Oxford, Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.

Smith, L. 2004. *Archaeological Theory and the Politics of Cultural Heritage*. London: Routledge.