



Entry-Level Archaeological Skills and Training in the UK – an Overview

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The Archaeology Training Forum (ATF)

The [Archaeology Training Forum](#) is a UK-wide umbrella group of governmental, professional, academic, charitable and commercial bodies involved in archaeology. The Forum promotes solutions to current training issues in the profession and stimulates action to ensure that future needs are met.

The Forum's 2016-18 Forward Plan includes initiatives designed to improve the infrastructure of career-entry provision and alternative routes into archaeology. While the [professional institute's training toolkit](#) shows how broad the subject area is, the following text will focus on the skills required for 'field archaeology' – survey, excavation and post-excavation work.

Context of archaeological jobs market

After a decline from 2008 to 2014, the [Archaeological Market Survey 2015](#) showed the start of an upturn, with a rise in confidence of contracting units following the initiation of major infrastructure projects like HS2 and other transport-related initiatives, and the proposed step-change in house building around the UK. This was recently supported by a 2016 report on [National Infrastructure Developments and the Historic Environment](#) and by subsequent research, and feedback from the main commercial organisations indicates that their experience of a shortage of skilled staff is becoming increasingly acute. It is anticipated that Brexit could significantly exacerbate an already significant shortage of trained archaeologists.

Only a minority of those who undertake an archaeology degree are believed to intend/expect to pursue a career in the discipline. While the vast majority of current archaeologists are graduates, it has long been recognised that university undergraduate courses are not specifically designed to produce competent field archaeologists at the end of their degrees. At present, only a very small number of people enter and stay in field archaeology without having come through an academic route, although the process of archaeological excavation is recognised by practitioners to be a *craft* that must be learned and that demands many non-academic, practical and transferrable skills.

Archaeological vocational training in place

Members of the ATF have been instrumental in creating and maintaining the [National Occupational Standard in Archaeological Practice](#), which was recently revised and continues to be kept up to date. This is the basis of the [Level 3 NVQ](#), for which the Professional Body, the [Chartered Institute for Archaeologist](#) (CifA), acts as an assessment centre.

The development of an archaeological [Skills Passport](#) has begun to fill a gap at and below Level 3 NVQ. Endorsed by many of the main UK archaeological contractors, and increasingly being adopted by universities, the Skills Passport is transferrable between employers, and is itself tied in with the NOS. The Passport was originally developed with and tested by students and community volunteers, and is appropriate for use by both, as well as by paid trainees.

Current initiatives

Building on the Skills Passport, thinking is currently underway for a Careers Passport that can begin to map out the steps an archaeologist might take to progress up the career ladder or switch between career pathways – something that, on the whole, is not well understood as things stand.

The ATF would like to see the use of the NVQ broadened and for a Level 4 NVQ to be available (and perhaps also a Level 2). This would demand links between commercial archaeological bodies and the academic sector, some of which are currently being explored between the [Federation of Archaeological](#)

[Managers and Employers](#) (FAME) and [University Archaeology UK](#) (UAUK). A new [BA in Archaeological Practice](#) at Winchester University includes a much larger practical component than usual, and shows how vocational modules can be embedded within archaeology degrees. In Scotland, universities and colleges are looking at joining forces to offer heritage-based qualifications, including distance learning options. This would complement existing post-graduate courses in archaeological practice, such as the full- or part-time MSc offered by the [University of the Highlands and Islands](#).

Work is well advanced in England to produce a [Historic Environment Practitioner apprenticeship](#), with support from [Historic England](#) (formerly part of English Heritage), CifA and FAME. Possibilities are also being explored for a similar apprenticeship offer in Scotland, where entry level apprenticeships and Graduate Apprenticeships are [being prioritised by the Scottish Government](#).

To complement the NVQ, the SQA also accredit sector-led [Professional Development Awards](#) (PDAs). These can be modular and have a good deal of flexibility, and like NVQs can be undertaken at different levels – perhaps matching the different levels of membership of CifA for example. CifA are currently exploring these with SQA, as PDAs may be able to be used to demonstrate levels of vocational competence of archaeologists working in development contexts, in anticipation of the phasing out of CSCS cards. PDAs also have the potential to be awarded as part of archaeological apprenticeships.

However, archaeological units like [Allen Archaeology](#) and recent recipients of the [Archaeology Training Award](#) have been devising and delivering their own on-the-job vocational training, usually tied in with the NOS, in order to produce and retain capable fieldworkers – regardless of prior educational attainments. This is already proving successful – including groups such as Cotswold, Wessex and MOLA – and is likely to become the norm as the skills shortage becomes even more acute.

Aspirations

The ATF aspiration is for a better mapped out career structure for archaeology, with clear entry level training that can develop basic skills but then allow people to progress, and for their training to be recognised between employers and across the sector. We would also like to see more opportunities for vocational training in at least some undergraduate courses and potentially for postgraduates.

The expected surge in demand for archaeological skills, highlighted in the [recent Historic England report](#), needs to be addressed in the short to medium term; this is something that ATF members are discussing with others, and may be underpinned by the Skills Passport. Online training is also being mooted, with translations into European languages, based on the Skills Passport in conjunction with bespoke video training, with the German speaking countries already beginning the process. In recognition of training needs, HS2 may consider whether training expectations can be written into the specifications for related archaeological work, providing a level playing field and helping employers with very tight margins to be more comfortable about making provision for early career training and support for career development training with existing staff. Skills and training must also be linked to better job security and longer employment contracts.

Conclusions

Much of the infrastructure for vocational training in field archaeology already exists, and is tried and tested but has yet to be fully embedded within the sector. Members of the ATF would like to change this, to improve and broaden the entry routes to the profession, and to improve the career structure and CPD, looking for continuity of employment and longer-term career sustainability.

Inevitably the picture is more complex than that summarised here: if it was easy we would have done it by now. A survey of historic environment specialists took place early in 2017 and is about to be published, and provides information to help us identify current and future gaps, and then compare those to current training provision. For field archaeology – the largest part of the sector – enough is already known from labour market intelligence reporting to predict future skills shortages, and there is consensus regarding attention being focused on career entry and early career provision.