

We don't have a JOBS problem

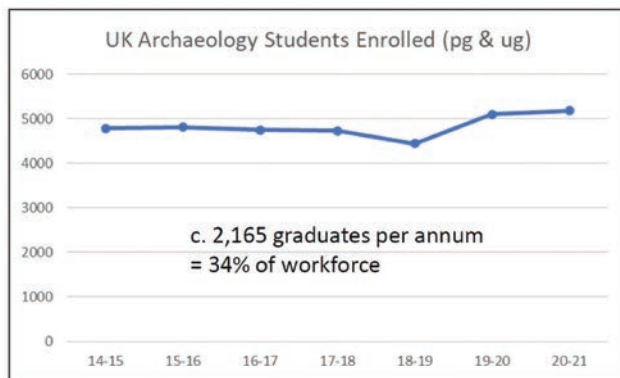
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Since 2020, archaeology in both the UK and the USA has been experiencing a recruitment 'squeeze'. At a time when demand for services has been very high, there have been unprecedented levels of hard-to-fill vacancies.

Governmental protection of construction as an 'essential' industry during the pandemic coincided with a high level of activity on infrastructure projects, boosting demand for archaeological services. In 2020, just on the eve of Covid-19 beginning to have an impact, it was estimated that there were 6300 archaeologists working in the UK, with more than two thirds of them employed in commercial archaeology (an estimated 4375 people).¹ By March 2021, UK archaeology had grown – in terms of the numbers of people working in it – to be larger than it had ever been.



Numbers of archaeologists in UK archaeology 2020. From profilingtheprofession.org.uk



Number of UK archaeology students enrolled. Data from HESA

There were at least eleven UK firms employing more than 100 archaeologists each.

Recruitment in archaeology has long followed the path of the knowledge economy, meaning companies seek to recruit people that are able to adapt to and work in knowledge-focused workplaces – and so graduates have historically been sought and expected to fill these positions. This has not previously been a problem, as in both the UK and the USA, the numbers of individuals graduating with degrees in archaeology (or anthropology) is far in excess of the natural replacement rate (the numbers of retirees or other people leaving the industry). Reviewing HESA data from 2014 to 2020,² the authors estimate that there are approximately 2165 new archaeology graduates every year in the UK. This is equivalent to 34 per cent of the total sectoral workforce – and so, if all were to take up positions in professional archaeology, the entire working population would be replaced every three years.

Although the whole workforce does not get replaced every three years, archaeology has always had a high rate of 'churn' – people coming into and leaving the industry. Previously, when people came into archaeology and then left the industry after a few years, there were always new graduates to replace them, which made an underlying structural problem invisible. The Covid-19 years have been a time of re-evaluation, attitudes to work have changed, and there has been a reckoning in archaeologists' career expectations.

Recruitment is different and more difficult than it was before Covid-19; 74 per cent of respondents to the *State of the Archaeological Market 2021*³ either agreed or strongly agreed that they had hard-to-fill vacancies. There is no longer the supply of European Union citizens that used to provide a reservoir of additional labour at busy times, and new entrants are reluctant to take up positions in archaeology. While employers are adapting to the new realities, with the biggest employers developing graduate and non-graduate training programmes and offering permanent contracts to all new hires, these are not yet remedying the underlying problem.

¹ Profiling the Profession 2020. <https://profilingtheprofession.org.uk/>

² Higher Education Statistics Agency. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/what-study>

³ State of the Archaeological Market 2021. <https://famearchaeology.co.uk/state-of-the-archaeological-market-2021-2/>

we have a CAREERS problem

Today, that problem is not with the number of graduates, or students not knowing about jobs in commercial archaeology; the problem is that we have lots of jobs – we just don't have many careers.

A way to address this might be to embed more economic value in the work that archaeologists do, so enabling sustainable, profitable companies to better support individual archaeologists on career trajectories, rather than opportunistically engaging them *ad hoc*.

In terms of chargeable hours, it is junior field staff that can be the most valuable members of the archaeological workforce. If they are only employed to work on specific projects, then 100 per cent of their time can be charged to clients. When more employees are needed, our industry needs to present a value proposition to job candidates that is *competitive with other industries*. Many other industries value archaeology graduates far more than we do and provide careers that are stable, have good salaries and benefits, may provide less difficult work, offer career advancement, and allow for a home base.

We need to value junior fieldworkers as the most financially valuable part of the staff complement. But they don't feel valued. So employers and the industry need to establish a new business model where firms can be profitable and grow value, while investing in the careers of junior field staff instead of using them to generate profits and accepting that many will get burned out and go to other industries.

The authors are preparing a forthcoming comparable paper that focuses on the situation in the United States.



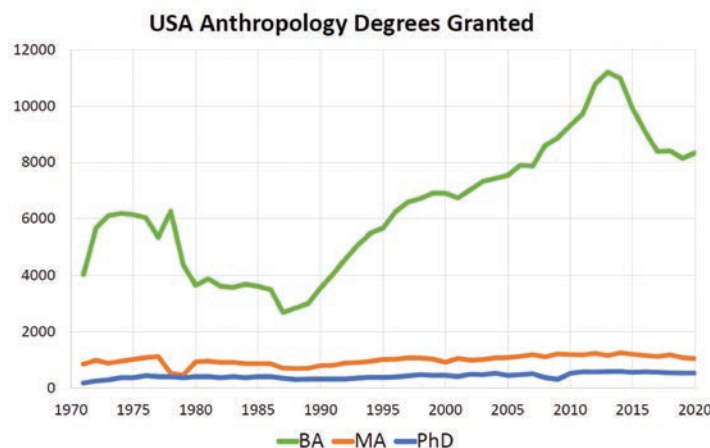
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USA commercial archaeology. Data from HBI



USA anthropology degrees granted. Data from US Department of Education & Coates 2005



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