Understanding Employability

Hiring priorities in professional archaeology
A number of metrics for the archaeological sector are recorded in ‘Profiling the Profession’, a series of reports produced at five-year intervals on behalf of the ClfA – most recently in 2012/13 by Landward Research Ltd. These surveys identify the archaeological workforce, their roles, salaries, and qualifications, the status of skills in the workforce, and the availability of training through employers.

A dataset not captured by these reports is what commercial units and other archaeological employers expect, when hiring for an ‘entry-level’ position, defined as a job for which a candidate with no previous paid employment in archaeology is considered. This information is important to current undergraduates, others interested in working in the field, and commercial units themselves.

This survey was conducted ahead of a workshop at Durham University in May 2015, with the aim of providing data rather than anecdotal evidence, to help current undergraduates understand what they could do to maximise their employability. Unfortunately, the results can only be considered valid for a limited period of time, as they are dependent on changes in the scale of the archaeological workforce, and the needs of employers.

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The survey format was chosen to facilitate comparison between responses from different parties, while also allowing for more extended, detailed answers.

The survey instrument consisted principally of questions asking for an assessment of the degree to which certain skills, qualifications, or experiences would influence the chance of the applicant being hired for an entry-level position by the employer. A Likert scale system was used for these questions, requiring responses on a scale of 0 to 10, with higher ratings representing a more positive impact for the application. This was supplemented by a number questions which provided the opportunity for free text comments.

The areas investigated in the survey were academic experience, including specialist skills such as osteoarchaeology; fieldwork experience; professional experience, including work outside archaeology; application skills; qualifications and memberships; and other knowledge and skills related to the heritage sector. A final category of questions established the company’s size, frequency of hiring over the last three years, willingness to hire recent graduates, and availability of training.
130 archaeological employers were contacted in March 2015, a group composed mainly of commercial fieldwork units, but also several County Council-managed units, archaeological trusts, research companies, and survey companies. Employers from museums and educational services were not included.

The list of employers was collated from online sources, principally the list of contractors given on the British Archaeological Jobs Resource. The survey was offered initially over the telephone, and this proved to be the preferred method of response for those employers that took part. However, in a number of cases, the appropriate respondent in the company was not able to take part at the time, and requested a written version of the survey. For this reason, a written format was created and sent via email instead. This format was also sent, with an email explaining the survey, to those employers who could not be reached by telephone. The responses from the written format survey were not distinct from those received in the telephone format.

Two companies declined to participate in the survey as a matter of company policy, while three were no longer trading, or were in the process of winding up. Ten companies had no entry-level archaeological employees, and no intention to hire any in the foreseeable future, and were therefore not asked to complete the survey. In total, 40 employers returned surveys, of which 39 were in a suitable format for analysis, giving a rate of return of 30% of the entities contacted. This exceeds the 10% sample size normally required to draw meaningful conclusions about a population, as well as the expected minimum of 30 cases needed for a valid sample.

The survey included several questions aimed at establishing the size of the current market for hiring entry-level staff, and the frequency at which these positions become available. This was also intended to permit investigation of whether hiring priorities are linked to either the size or hiring frequency of the company.

The average number of entry-level positions with each company, including casual staff, was 11.14 at the time of the survey, although this masks the degree of variation between the units. 18% of responding companies did not have staff in roles they considered entry-level, while 41% had between 1 and 5 entry-level positions in place. 26% had between 6 and 15 staff in entry-level positions, with 7.7% having 16 to 30, and another 7.7% having over 31.

Recruitment for these positions averaged 10.06 staff per year between 2012 and 2015, including casuals brought in. 36% of employers took on a new employee less than once a year, while 31% hired between 1 and 3 staff annually. 15% of responding companies took on between 4 and 10 staff annually, with the remaining 18% of employers hiring more than 10 staff each year.
Overall, the responding employers rated non-academic skills and experiences significantly higher than academic skills and experiences. As seen overleaf, four of the six most highly valued qualities related to experience and understanding of professional employment in archaeology in Britain. Previous experience in professional archaeology (8.44) was the highest scored, followed by an awareness of the reality of work in commercial archaeology (7.50). Voluntary experience with a commercial unit (7.26), and experience of a range of archaeological sites (7.18) were also highly valued. The remaining two top qualities were possession of a driving license – the most highly rated, at 8.64 – and submitting a good resume, the third most influential factor (7.79).

Holding a degree in archaeology was considered important – scoring 7.10 overall, and ranked as the seventh most helpful quality for finding employment. However, having an above average final result was not significant (4.50). Academic specialisations at the undergraduate level were generally rated poorly – with five receiving scores below 6.00. The exceptions to this were training in report writing (7.03), and survey and prospection techniques (6.19). Training in GIS applications and photography were rated at 5.87 and 5.53 respectively, indicating that they are helpful skills for undergraduates to gain, but were not expected in candidates.

Fieldwork in non-commercial environments was generally rated poorly. While gaining a university degree in archaeology was considered important, experience of university fieldwork training was rated at 6.17. Some respondents commented on the variability of this training between institutions, although several suggested that this experience was considered more valuable where they were familiar with the staff or department conducting the training. Holding a supervisory position during university field training did not greatly improve the strength of an application, and was rated at 3.68. University training did score somewhat more highly than other schemes, with attendance of a field training school scored at 6.08, and community projects at 5.60. Perhaps surprisingly, experience of professional archaeology outside the UK scored only 3.85.
Factors associated with a candidate’s application, other than the presentation and content of their CV, were not considered influential in affecting employability. Having made previous applications to the company was the lowest rated of all the factors, at 1.71. Speculative applications for employment were considered somewhat advantageous, averaging a rating of 3.28. Contacting an employer for further information or to discuss an advertised position was considered more positive for candidates, scoring 4.73.

Holding a CSCS (Construction Skills Health and Safety) card was rated as a valuable quality, if not an essential one, scoring 6.67. Memberships were rated somewhat lower, with the CIfA at 4.90, and the CBA or local societies at 3.96. Professional skills were received well, however, with evidence of organisational skills rated in the top ten, at 7.09, and critical thinking a little lower with an average rating of 6.46. Having a record of continuing professional development scored 5.73, while knowledge of policies and practices in heritage management was rated at a moderate 5.44. Finally, having employment experience in general, even if outside archaeology, was rated at 5.73.

Right: Mean ratings assigned by respondents to each quality or qualification, with all respondents weighted equally.
Open responses

A number of the employers felt able to quantify the length of non-commercial fieldwork experience they expected candidates to have. These 25 companies expected around 12-13 weeks of fieldwork experience. Six companies entered a variation on a common theme of ‘quality over quantity’, and indicated an interest in where the experience was acquired, the reputation of the body organising the fieldwork, and the range of experiences gained. Several of these companies identified referees as a way of assessing fieldwork quality. Five companies considered non-commercial fieldwork to be effectively irrelevant, beyond showing interest and physical capability, while two more simply stated ‘as much as possible’.

Unsurprisingly, a number of units identified the value of experience in construction or engineering (6 citations), museum work or work with a historical theme (4 citations), and especially work related to geographical or geological survey (10 citations). References to army, outdoor, or physical occupations were made by four units. Other employment sectors referenced included education, outreach, communicative or creative industries, computer-based work, photography, environmental work, accounting, research, and data handling. Twelve employers provided no viable response to this question.

A further open-response question was included to provide context to the subjectively phrased Likert-scale question ‘How important is a good CV’, by eliciting definitions of a ‘good’ CV. The range of answers was quite broad, with 16 different categories of response being listed between the 39 units. However, a small number were frequently cited. 22 employers define a good CV as ‘short’, ‘concise’, or ‘succinct’, although this was often qualified by a desire that a CV should contain enough detail without becoming wordy. A clearly and logically structured CV was mentioned by 17 employers, while 15 noted that CVs should be tailored to the job advertised, either by focussing on relevant skills, or referring directly to the job specification. Other qualities expected in a good CV were accuracy of spelling and grammar (11 citations), highlighting the applicant’s key skills (8 citations), being honest and accurate (6 citations), and containing sufficient detail to give a meaningful understanding of the applicant’s experience (6 citations).

Finally, suggestions were invited for important factors in employability that had not been listed in the Likert-scale questions. Several of the responses to this questions related to qualities presented through a CV, and were merged into the data given in the previous paragraph. The range of responses was again broad, with 18 different categories of answer, and none being given by more than four different employers.

Good references were cited in this section by several employers, in addition to those who had mentioned references as evidence for the quality of fieldwork experience.

Demonstrating a sense of humour was cited 4 times, and the same number of employers were concerned that a candidate should live in the local area, or specifically mention their willingness to move for the position. Willingness to learn and physical fitness each received 3 mentions. Other qualities mentioned as those employers might look for in an application included intelligence, a willingness to work away, sector-specific knowledge, and social media skills.
Training Schemes

This section of the survey was included at the request of the CIfA, and asked respondents to state whether they offered training to staff in entry-level positions, and if so, whether that training was through a formal programme, informal but with identified targets, or informal without targets. Only 5 of the 39 responding companies offered no training for entry-level staff. These five were smaller than average, and four were also less active, or not active at all, in the hiring market. The fifth company was a relatively frequent hirer, but of casual staff, who were expected to already have the required skills.

Among the 34 employers offering training, the vast majority provided informal schemes, with only four stating that they also provided access to some formal graduate training alongside this. However, more respondents organised some or all of their informal training towards identified targets or outcomes (20) than provided training without identified targets (14).

There was some correlation between the size of the company and the formality of training provided, with smaller companies (in the 0 and 1-5 entry-level staff categories) generally offering informal training without targets, or no training at all. Larger employers (6-15, 16-30, and 30+ entry level staff) all provided some form of training, with 75% providing formal training, or informal training with identified targets. Three of the four employers offering formal training fell into the 6-15 entry-level staff category.

Weighted results

The information received in the survey showed strong variation in the number of staff taken on per year in entry-level positions between different employers, with some taking on no new staff in the last three years, and one hiring approximately 150 times per year, including temporary and casual positions. Consequently, weighting each employer equally does not accurately represent the job market as perceived by applicants. To counteract this, the information was weighted according to the categorised hiring frequencies each company selected in their survey response.

These results showed broadly the same pattern as the unweighted results, with nine of the same qualities selected in the top ten, while evidence of organisational skills was replaced by undergraduate training in GIS applications. However, there were some noticeable changes, in both the absolute rating average for each field, and their relative rankings.
Professional experience continued to make up three of the five most highly rated qualities (professional experience, 8.60; voluntary experience, 8.26; and awareness of the realities of employment, 8.18), with all three being rated somewhat more highly in the weighted values. However, experience of a range of site types was considered less important (7.33). This, together with having a good CV (7.87) was overtaken by having a degree (8.20). Professional experience outside the UK was not rated significantly differently in the weighted data, at 4.23.

Undergraduate-level training in GIS applications was rated at 7.16, with training in photography seeing a similar increase to 6.49, and survey techniques seeing a moderate increase. Undergraduate training in illustration (5.39), zooarchaeology (5.02), and osteoarchaeology (4.02) were given noticeably higher ratings in the weighted assessment, but remained lower in the relative ranking of skills and qualifications. Having a good degree was rated more strongly, at 5.57.

Membership of the CIfA was seen a more positive light in this data, at 6.17, while contacting the advertising company to discuss the position also gained noticeably (5.72).

Experience outside professional archaeology was markedly less valuable – university fieldwork training was ranked 11 places lower in the weighted data (4.78), with community projects regarded similarly (5.53). Work experience in other fields was also rated significantly lower, at 4.03.

Above: Mean ratings assigned by respondents to each quality or qualification, weighted by hiring frequency.
The weighted results reflect to a greater extent the priorities of employers that hire more frequently. The implication is therefore that these employers place less significance on participation in university fieldwork, community archaeology projects, and work experience outside archaeology – although still acknowledging that they have a positive influence on a candidate’s employability. At the same, modules offering training in specific skills at undergraduate level are received more positively, as are both holding a degree in archaeology, and gaining an above average degree result.

Taken together, this suggests that these employers prefer skills and experiences that can be clearly identified from a CV. In particular, those which have a measurable outcome, and which are comparable with those of other candidates are more valued. This interpretation is supported by the comments from some participants in the survey that university and community projects vary in the quality of experience and training provided. These respondents noted that unless they were personally familiar with the projects or the staff involved, they assumed that the impact on the candidate was minimal.

From the weighted results, it appears that units that hire more frequently are more likely to make this assumption. This may be because the increased recruitment rate reduces the time these units can spend investigating and assessing the quality of the projects mentioned on a candidate’s CV. In contrast, academic results and the ability to pass a given training module represent a readily understandable and comparable measurement of candidates, while skills-based modules are easily identified from a CV or application form.
Although submitting a well-presented CV was given approximately the same importance in the weighted results, it was overtaken by several other qualities. This relative drop in position may be due to the use of application forms in many companies. These require the candidate to make statements assessing their own skills in relation to the job specification, and remove the onus from the CV in presenting this information.

Finally, the importance of references should not be underestimated. Several respondents stated the importance of good references in showing how effectively the candidate had learned from the experiences listed on a CV. Respondents indicated that they feel able to judge the value of references that come from an employer who is known to them either professionally or personally.

Useful Resources

**The British Archaeological Jobs Resource** – [www.bajr.org](http://www.bajr.org)
Commonly known as BAJR, this is an indispensable source for information on jobs and training course, not only for those aiming to work in archaeology, but those already employed. Run by a professional archaeologist, BAJR also has an interest in workplace conditions and professional development. The group has an active Facebook presence, which is a good source for information.

**The Council for British Archaeology** – [www.archaeologyuk.org](http://www.archaeologyuk.org)
The CBA is a major piece in the mosaic of regional and specialist societies, and amateur archaeology organisations across the country, and also produces the ‘Archaeology’ periodical. The website has contacts for a range of training courses and volunteer experiences, as well as funding opportunities. The CBA also organises a series of workplace training schemes that are an alternative route into professional employment.

**The Chartered Institute for Archaeologists** – [www.archaeologists.net](http://www.archaeologists.net)
The CIfA is the most widely recognised professional body representing archaeologists in the UK, and sets targets for both employers and employees in professional training and standards, career professional development, and employment conditions. The CIfA produces a fortnightly jobs bulletin for members, covering heritage management and academia, as well as excavation roles.
Conclusions for current undergraduates

For those who have yet to complete their studies, but are looking for work in archaeology in the future, it is important to emphasise the potential for fluctuation in the job market, as referenced by a number of companies.

The results emphasise the value of practical experience with professional companies over other qualities. The majority of undergraduate archaeology courses require 2-6 weeks attendance at a training dig, but placements with commercial units are rare. Gaining this experience therefore requires effort on the student’s part, but the survey suggests it significantly increases employability.

Academic success, beyond successful completion of the degree course, was not considered as helpful. Experience of some skill-based training modules, such as GIS, survey techniques, and photography, did increase a candidate’s employability, while others, notably zooarchaeology and osteoarchaeology, were not significant. These skills are generally associated with specialist staff in professional archaeology, and are not expected in entry-level positions. However, it should also be noted that taking these modules may be useful for access to postgraduate courses that lead to work in those specialist roles.

Having a driving license was considered important by most employers, and is something that can be undertaken alongside degree studies. Similarly, most universities offer training in CV writing skills, and in how to produce relevant, tailored applications for the posts advertised.

Finally, several employers mentioned in passing that when hiring, they pay special attention to applications from archaeologists they have personal experience of working with, either through previous temporary positions, or participation in community and undergraduate field projects. Attending several of these projects gives students the chance to experience a range of different site types, meet potential future employers and demonstrate their fieldwork proficiency – as well as their general character, considering that 10% of the responding companies value a good sense of humour.
Conclusions for recent graduates

Working voluntarily with commercial units is a good way to develop skills and experience, and is rated by employers almost as highly as full employment. However, this may not be a financial possibility for recent graduates needing to cover their rent and living expenses outside of the student world. Furthermore, the use of volunteers has wider implications for the number of paid positions available in the job market, as recognised by several respondents.

Those who have already completed their undergraduate degree, but are still looking for work in archaeology, are less able to undertake training in specialist skills – although these courses may be available for a fee – but as the survey has shown, most employers prioritise other qualities.

Working outside of archaeology was seen as increasing employability over those with no work experience at all, although not to the same degree as work within the heritage sector. Several companies identified a need for applicants to show a continuing interest in the field, suggesting that at least some voluntary involvement in archaeology, such as in evening or weekend activities, is a good idea.

Lastly, one area where graduates can improve their employability is in their application skills – producing a good CV, tailoring their application to the job specification. Respondents also rated contacting the company to discuss the position as a positive trait, provided that the candidate had a meaningful question to ask.
Survey on graduate employability in commercial archaeology

For each section, please rate how important you consider each of the skills, qualifications, or qualities, to be when you are reviewing applications for entry-level vacancies. Please give a number between -1 and 10, with -1 indicating ‘unhelpful for the candidate’, 0 indicating ‘no importance’ and 10 indicating ‘very high importance’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A degree in archaeology</td>
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<tr>
<td>• An above average degree result</td>
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Having taken a specialised course during their degree in:

- Osteoarchaeology
- Zooarchaeology
- Survey and prospection techniques
- Illustration
- Use of GIS applications
- Photography
- Report writing

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<tr>
<th>Fieldwork experience:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University fieldwork training or equivalent</td>
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<tr>
<td>A supervisory role during university fieldwork</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attendance at a field training school outside university</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participating in community archaeology projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience of a range of different site types</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voluntary experience with a commercial unit</td>
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What do you feel is an appropriate amount of non-commercial fieldwork experience for applicants to have accumulated?

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<th>Professional:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Experience in professional archaeology outside the UK</td>
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<tr>
<td>Previous professional experience with a UK commercial unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment experience in fields other than archaeology</td>
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Are there any that you would consider more relevant to applying for an entry-level position in commercial archaeology?
**Applications:**

- Having made prior applications for positions
- Contacting the unit directly to discuss the position advertised
- Contacting the unit directly when no positions are advertised
- A well-presented CV and covering letter

*What constitutes a well-presented CV in your opinion?*

**Qualifications and memberships:**

- A driving license
- A CSCS card
- CiFA membership
- Membership of the CBA or local archaeological societies

**Other:**

**Evidence of other skills:**

- Critical thinking
- Organisational skills
- Career Professional Development recording

- An understanding of government policies and practices for heritage management
- An understanding of the realities of employment in commercial archaeology

*Are there any other items that might be listed on a CV, which you feel would help that application, and which I have not mentioned?*
With thanks to Dr Sarah Semple and Kate Geary for their comments and suggestions.

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