Correspondent

Education is important, as is training: Mike Heyworth looks at ways to improve pathways into archaeology

In 2005 the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) lost a battle to save the GCSE qualification in archaeology. None of the exam boards thought it was financially viable to continue to offer the qualification, given the low number of candidates being examined each year.

Now there are rumbles that a similar fate might befall a Level archaeology. Ofqual, the government department that regulates exams in England, is reviewing A levels, including archaeology (see http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/completing-gcse-as-and-a-level-reform). With just under 1,000 awards for A level archaeology in 2012, the subject is considered ripe for reform (hopefully not a euphemism for “cut”). The A level specification currently offered by the AQA exam board—which it describes as “one of the most exciting subjects in the curriculum” (w w w .aqa.org.uk/ subjects/archaeology/a-level/ archaeology-2010)—is the only academic qualification currently available for archaeology below degree level.

The CBA recently published research undertaken by Judith Aird, commissioned by the Subject Committee for Archaeology (SCFA, the grouping of heads of archaeology departments in UK higher education). The report, Archaeology Education Pathways – A Level & Beyond: A Survey of Key Stakeholders to Review Sustainability of the Current Progression Pathways in Academic Archaeology, can be found online at new.archaeologyuk.org/cba-research-bulletin.

The SCFA was concerned that applications to study archaeology
are dropping. Students are thought to be more likely to pursue archaeology at university if they have studied it earlier in their academic career, so it is in the interests of archaeology degree providers to have more A level awards in the subject. This in no way limits future career options: the wide range of transferable skills offered by archaeology courses suits diverse employment. The survey targeted a level centres and students, university departments and students, and employers. The main conclusions were that archaeology remains popular, and it potentially demand from students is also likely to increase, with more resources available to teach the subject and generally improved exam results.

Another key factor in determining take up for the A level qualification – and onward progression to an undergraduate degree – is the perception of the archaeological profession as lacking in career opportunities. This also concerns university departments that teach archaeology. They are keen to point out that archaeology at undergraduate level is not a vocational course, but an excellent training programme. The CBA’s CAPT scheme provided over 50 individuals with a year-long training opportunity to develop their community archaeology facilitation skills, many involving working with young people. At recent ceremonies for the bursary holders held in Cardif and York, graduates from the scheme talked about how much they had gained from the opportunity (see Correspondent May/Jun 2013/130). Over the last few years the IFA has been able to offer training support in a diverse range of archaeological skills funded via the same programme. Other organisations, such as English Heritage, have been able to fund historic initiatives to the same extent – as you would see in many other disciplines – further thought needs to be given to how we sustain these training opportunities, and encourage the development of skills in the sector.

Working with partners in the Archaeology Training Forum, and with the members of SCFA, the CBA wants to create new pathways for engagement with archaeology, through academic qualifications and skills training. These should be open to everyone with an interest in archaeology, not just people who want to become archaeologists. This is another strand of the CBA’s Archaeology Matters appeal (www.archaeologymatters.org.uk), which seeks to help archaeology and archaeologists in difficult times. We would welcome support and ideas for how we can work together to improve education and training in archaeology.

Mike Heyworth is the director of the Council for British Archaeology.

In your opinion, what would discourage students currently studying a level archaeology from applying to study archaeology at university?

"Transferable skills" are defined as those versatile skills that you can apply and make use of in a number of different roles. Which of the following transferable skills do you think students gain through study of A level archaeology?